

Feast of the Ascension - C Cycle May 8, 2016

INTRODUCTION: (*Acts 1,1-11; Ephesians 1, 17-23; Luke 24, 40-53*) St. Luke gave us two books in the New Testament: The Acts of the Apostles and, of course, his gospel. We hear from both of them today. The Ascension is the bridge that connects these two books of the New Testament. It is interesting to notice that Luke treats the Ascension in two different ways in each of these two books. In the Acts of the Apostles (our first reading) Luke tells us the Ascension occurred 40 days after Easter. As Luke ends his gospel, however, he describes how Jesus appeared to his apostles Easter Sunday night, spoke with them, ate with them and then, on Easter Sunday night, he led them out to Bethany where he ascended into heaven. Which of these events was the real Ascension? Do you think it took Jesus 40 days to return to his Father? I don't think so. Remember in John's gospel shortly after the resurrection he appeared to Mary Magdalene and when she approached him, perhaps to embrace him, he said to her literally: "do not touch me, because I have not yet gone up to the Father." (Jn. 20,17) But during the evening of that same day, Easter Sunday, Jesus appeared to his apostles and in Luke's gospel he tells his apostles: "touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. (Lk. 24,39) In John, it is a week later when Jesus tells Thomas "reach out your hand and put it in my side." (Jn 20,27) The question is when did Jesus really ascend to the Father; this was something he greatly desired; John tells us he said: "If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father." (Jn.14,28)

HOMILY: Happy Mother's Day to all our mothers. Your dedication is phenomenal. You've volunteered for a 24 hour a day job, with little or no pay. Although at times your love is tested, it doesn't give up. For few material rewards you make great sacrifices for the joy of being able to help our God create one more awesome human being whom you can care for and who might someday care for you. With many responsibilities, it's no wonder a mother has to get down on her knees at times and call on God for help. And this is one of the things that brings us together right now. Congratulations mothers, grandmothers, and those of you who have the role of mother for people they are not related to by blood, but are related to by love.

Today is the feast of the Ascension. I pointed out in the introduction that although it's hard to figure when the Ascension took place, whether it happened on day one or day 40 or some other day, what we really have here is a clue to what meaning the Ascension has for Jesus and for us.

Père Benoit, a much acclaimed Scripture Scholar, distinguishes two different streams of early tradition on the subject of the Ascension; one he calls the "visible Ascension" and the other he calls the "essential Ascension." For about 40 days after the Resurrection, Jesus was appearing quite frequently, but after about 40 days these appearances pretty much stopped. The visible ascension that took place at that time gave the Apostles the certainty and the experience of Christ's exaltation. The other ascension, which could be called the essential ascension was not visible to anyone. It would be like when someone dies and their spirit goes into heaven – no one sees it; in the case of Jesus however his risen body was taken up to be with the Father and Jesus was seated at God's right hand. This could be called "the essential Ascension and was identical with the glorification whereby Christ was lifted beyond this world into a heavenly existence." (*F.X.Durrwell, the Resurrection, pg 39 footnote*) This return to the Father would have taken place on Easter Sunday itself. Jesus thus entered into a richer existence, and his death and resurrection was the way that led there. Life in this world and life with the Father are profoundly different, "and passing from one to the other involves a transformation in one's way of being." (*Durrell op cit pg 39*)

As Jesus was on his way to the Father, so are we. Jesus is the first fruits of all who have died (1 Cor. 15,20) In other words, what we celebrate in Jesus today, is a preview of God's plans for all of us. God's invitation comes to all of us. Our Lord told us not everyone accepts the invitation. But those who do will share in God's life in an awesomely glorious way.

A question came up at the Bible Study the other day – how does what Jesus did save us. Jesus gave us a way to understand how salvation happens in the parable of the vine and the branches. Through baptism we are united with him and we become sharers in his risen life. And just as life passes through the vine to keep all the branches alive, Jesus' life (which we call grace) continues to flow into us through Communion and prayer and good works. This risen life of Christ that flows into us is something we experience at times and it is something we do not experience, but it is in us if we remain united with him.

I don't know about you, but when I see a movie or read a book, I like a story that has a happy ending. The Ascension is as much as we can grasp right now about the happy ending our life will have if we remain one with Christ. Amen.

Vigil of Pentecost – C Cycle

May 15, 2016

INTRODUCTION: There are eleven possible readings for the feast of Pentecost, six for the vigil and five for the feast itself. On Sunday there is a special sequence before the gospel. Only Easter and Pentecost have a special sequence that is required and Corpus Christi has an optional one. Today is indeed a special feast, the third most important feast in the Church year, the feast that celebrates the completion of Jesus' saving work with his sending of the Holy Spirit. Thanks to those who wore red, the color of the Holy Spirit.

Saturday: Our first reading today is from the prophet Ezekiel. The field of dry bones represents the destruction of Israel by the Babylonians. It appeared to the Jews that survived the invasion that God's kingdom in the Promised Land had now been totally destroyed. But God would not allow that to happen. When Ezekiel refers to God's Spirit in today's first reading, he is referring to God's power to create life since God's people 600 years before Christ did not know about the Trinity.

Sunday: Pentecost was an ancient Jewish feast, one of the three most important among all the Jewish feasts. God the Father and Jesus chose this feast as the time to send the Holy Spirit upon God's new kingdom. For this occasion, God gave a special gift to his apostles, allowing them to proclaim God's favor to people of every nation.

HOMILY: Two hundred years ago this year, a man was born named Antoine Frederic Ozanam. He was a distinguished scholar, a journalist, a doctor of law, a doctor of letters and a professor of law as well as a professor of foreign literature at the Sorbonne in Paris. In his short life (of 40 years) as a professor, a father and a husband, he managed to found a society to help the poor, the Conference of Charity, which today is known as the society of St. Vincent de Paul. St. Vincent de Paul was a French saint who dedicated himself to helping the poor 200 years before **Blessed** Frederic Ozanam was born. I call Ozanam blessed because Pope John Paul declared him blessed in 1997, the last step before sainthood. Why do I tell you this? Not just because it's the 200th anniversary of his birth, but also because it is one example of the Holy Spirit at

work. The Spirit inspired Frederic Ozanam, a layman, to live a life of learning, scholarship and holiness. We have a parish that generously supports a food pantry and generous volunteers who help distribute the food on Saturday afternoon. That is how the Spirit inspires a lot of people (donors and workers) to help over 100 people monthly who need help.

I have a success story I would like to tell you from our St. Vincent de Paul work. There was a man named Rodney who came in for food. He was an ex-con who had put in his time. One time when he came in he asked Kathleen, who works in the food pantry, for a skillet. When she was shopping later in the week, she bought one and gave it to him. This fired up his interest in cooking. He joined a cooking class at the Freestore and in a short time he became such a good cook that he is now the kitchen manager at the Freestore and works there also as liaison between P & G and the Freestore. His story has inspired some of his buddies who were down and out to realize they too could improve their lot in life. I see this story also as the work of the Spirit inspiring Kathleen to go out and get a \$9.00 skillet for one of the people who came to our pantry.

Jesus spoke many times about the Holy Spirit. One thing he said that always struck me as strange is when he said, "it is better for you that I go, for if I do not go the Holy Spirit will not come to you." (Jn 16,7) Surely the apostles wondered, as I did, how could anything be an advantage, how could anything be better for them if Jesus were to leave them. As we now know, Jesus didn't really leave them, rather he remained with them through the Holy Spirit he sent them. Here is one of the advantages of having the Holy Spirit. Jesus physically could not be everywhere, but through the Spirit, Jesus could be touching the hearts and minds of all seven billion people in the world today, if they were all receptive to his Spirit.

It is hard to imagine the Holy Spirit for the Holy Spirit chooses to stay out of the spotlight and prefers to work behind the scenes. The Spirit is with us now when we come together in faith and prayer. The Spirit helps us to listen to God's word. We pray for the Spirit to change bread and wine into Christ's body and blood. The Spirit guides the Church, and the Church still survives even when the Church leaders and members do not always let themselves be guided by the Spirit. The Spirit blesses our inner spirits with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control, gifts that Paul lists in Galatians (5, 22 & 23). With all that the Spirit does, what does the Spirit not do? The Spirit does not force us. God gave us a free will and the Spirit does not take that away. The Spirit inspires us to move in God's direction, but it's our choice whether or not we do so. The Spirit guides and inspires the whole Church and the Spirit guides and inspires each one of us individually. In (Sunday's) gospel we hear Jesus say the Spirit "will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you." That is one of the ways I have experienced the Spirit working in my life, reminding me what I should do, how I should live, and helping the Scriptures come alive for me. Sometimes in counseling I have experienced an idea coming into my head that was just the right thing to say to a person and I end up asking myself, "where did that idea come from?" For a long time all I ever knew of the Spirit was he would help us when we had to take a test. Here too the Spirit helps, but the Spirit also teaches us to be responsible, and I've found if I didn't do my homework, the Spirit wasn't going to whisper the answers in my ears. If we had another hour, I couldn't say everything that could be said about the Spirit. Just open your own heart to the Spirit and discover the blessings the Spirit can bring. Jesus promised the Father would send the Spirit to those who ask him for the Holy Spirit. (Lk, 11,14)

(I ended up adapting the above homily for the homily on Pentecost – didn't have time to re-write it)

Pentecost – C Cycle

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HOMILY: A drunk walked into Church one Sunday while the pastor was preaching. The drunk asked the usher "how long has your minister been preaching here?" The usher said "about 35 years." The drunk said well, then, I think I'll just stick around. He must be ready to finish what he's been saying."

We have a topic today that could take an awfully long time to talk about – the Holy Spirit. It's fairly easy to picture in our mind God the Father and Jesus. But when we think of the Holy Spirit, we may think of a dove or wind or breath or tongues of fire. That's not much to work with to feed our imagination. And yet the Holy Spirit is so very active in our lives and in the Church. I started thinking of all the ways the Holy Spirit is active in the Church and in our lives and I thought what a long homily that would be. So, to keep it simple, I thought I would focus on just one way the Spirit touches our lives.

The Holy Spirit is especially involved in the creation and unification of the Church. That function is usually attributed to the Holy Spirit, but to be theologically correct, the Father and the Son are equally involved in this most desirable objective. In the coming of the Spirit, notice that although the Spirit came upon each of Jesus' followers individually, the Spirit came on them all, all at the same time. The Spirit was uniting them into one body of believers. Every time we say the Creed, the Church is immediately associated with the Holy Spirit. Notice: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, etc." "The Communion of Saints" is another way of referring to the Church – the assembly of God's Holy Ones. I stress this idea of union within the Church, led by the one Holy Spirit, because this was something so dear to Jesus. At the Last Supper this was something he especially prayed for: "that they all may be one." (Jn. 17,21) St. Paul was really a tiger when he saw the communities he founded break into small factions, with various ones thinking they were superior to most of the other believers for one reason or another. Paul insisted on unity in the Church – not uniformity, because we're

all different like the different parts of the body, but even with those differences, we are called to be one: “Has Christ been divided?” he asks. “Or was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (I Cor. 1,13) I want to emphasize especially what Paul says in the second reading: “In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit. (I Cor 12, 13).

When people tell me, I don't go to Church any more, but I am a spiritual person, I can't help wondering by whose spirit have they become spiritual persons. St. John says “test every spirit,” (I Jn. 4,1) John is telling us: not every spirit, not every urge or brainstorm or idea that comes to us is from God. If someone says they are spiritual, it's not always the Holy Spirit at work – even if they go to Church all the time. But going to Church is a good place to start in becoming spiritual according to the Holy Spirit, because that's where the Holy Spirit started, with God's people gathered together in prayer.

Feast of the Holy Trinity – C Cycle May 22, 2016

INTRODUCTION: *Prov. 8,22-31; Romans 5,1-5; John 16,12-15*

In the Wisdom literature of the Bible, for instance in the Book of Proverbs, from which our first reading is taken, wisdom is sometimes pictured as a person; especially a woman who tirelessly tries to lead people away from foolishness and sin. In today's passage, wisdom is described as a person who was with God before creation and who helped God create the world. This is not to be understood as a reference to the Trinity. The revelation of the Trinity did not come until Christ came, and the Book of Proverbs was composed about 500 years before Christ. Today's passage simply gives us a hint of things that were yet to be revealed.

HOMILY: Today I face a double challenge. First I need to say something about the Trinity, which we will never fully comprehend. Second I have to be brief, because Sister Winnie is here to talk about the work of the Comboni Mission Sisters.

The mystery of the Trinity can be summed up as a mystery of love - an intense, divine, unflinching love that unites three persons, a love that existed before creation and which will exist forever after. With a love that is beyond our comprehension, this love reaches out to us today inviting us to share in this divine love. In today's Mass, this mysterious love of God calls for our response. Amen

The Body and Blood of Christ – C Cycle May 29, 2016

INTRODUCTION – *(Genesis, 14, 18-20; I Corinthians 11, 23-26; Luke 9, 11b-17)*

Today's first reading takes us to the Holy Land during the time of Abraham about 1850 years before Christ. Abraham's nephew, Lot, had been captured by some local tribes and Abraham set out to rescue him. On his return, he passed by Salem which is Jerusalem today. He was met by Melchizedek who was both king and high priest in that district. It was not unusual at the time for the same person to be both king and high priest. Melchizedek offered bread and wine. It is hard to know whether it was offered as refreshment to Abraham or if it was offered as a sacrifice to God Most High. At any event, some of the early fathers in the Church saw this

gesture as a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. (Our stained-glass window on the side depicts this scene.)

The second reading from St. Paul is especially significant in that the Letter to the Corinthians was written 10 to 15 years before the earliest gospel; thus our second reading is the oldest description of the Eucharist there is. The language Paul uses indicates this is a tradition that is authentic and reliable. He received it from the Lord and he handed it on to the Corinthians as he had received it. Receiving it “from the Lord” does not necessarily mean that he received it directly, but that it is an essential part of the gospel and has its origin in the teaching and the life of Jesus Christ.

HOMILY: I may have told this story before about a man who was standing outside in the backyard of his home talking to his neighbor. He said “my wife and I went to the best lecture today about how to keep your memory sharp. His neighbor asked who gave the lecture? The man paused for a moment trying to think, then he said: “what do you call that beautiful flower, which is usually red and has a long stem and thorns?” His neighbor said: “a rose?” He said that’s right, a rose. Then he turned toward the back door of his house and yelled: “hey, Rose, what was the name of the person who gave the lecture today? “

So many things we forget in life, even important things. There are things we can do that will help us remember. For example, one sure way to be certain you will never forget your wife’s birthday is to forget it one time.

Because we do tend to forget, we need a day like Memorial Day to remind us how much we owe to those who have gone before us, those who have died fighting for our freedom first of all, but also those who have worked hard building our society, researching how to improve our world, giving their time teaching us, etc. St. Paul asks in I Corinthians “what do you have that you have not received?” Even the ambition to learn and the energy and health we have that allows us to work and to make a living are things we have received. We are so deeply indebted to many people and also to God.

Because we tend to forget, God has given us a way to keep remembering his love for us and his presence with us. He has given us something that looks like a little bit of bread and a little sip of wine – but it is neither bread nor wine. In reality it is the body and blood of Christ: his body and blood which he gave for us on the cross to assure us of his faithful love. He wants us to remember this, so he said: “do this in remembrance of me.” Not only does it help us remember, but by means of this gift he is actually with us. It’s not just an event that happened 2000 years ago – what we are remembering is made real for us in the present moment. For he tells us in John’s gospel: “my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” (*Jn 6,55-56*) And Jesus does not lie.

People say they don’t understand how this can be? Because we don’t understand it, does not make it impossible. How many things has science brought to light in the past 150 years that people before that time never understood. We still do not understand so many things in astronomy, biology, medicine, physics, psychology, etc. Jesus tells us to accept what you hear, “this is my body, this cup is the new covenant in my blood.” (*I Cor 11,23-26*) Believe it because Jesus said it. All through the gospel we see whenever Jesus said something, it happened – whether it was healing a sick person or calming a storm, or prophesizing something that was going to happen, or feeding 5000 people with five small loaves and two fish.

It has always been a help to me to see in the host and chalice a divine energy - the same energy that flows through a vine and its branches which Jesus tells us about in John chapter 15. Or it's the same divine energy that flows through our body, like the body that Paul talks about in I Cor 12, 27ff when he tells us: "you are Christ's body and individually parts of it." Today we celebrate the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. It is a feast to strengthen our faith in Jesus' true presence in the Eucharist, a presence which feeds and nourishes us and a presence that reminds us that he is with us and loves us. People who don't like to go to Church may say, of course he is always with us. That's true (it's true even when we're not with him) but he is especially with us in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Those who miss the Eucharist are missing the most profound experience of union with God that is offered to us in this world. Amen.