

Feast of the Ascension - A Cycle

June 5, 2011

(Acts 1,1-11; Ephesians 1, 17-23; Matthew 28,16-20)

During June a lot of people get married. So I have three stories about marriage:

- 1) A little boy asked his father "Daddy, how much does it cost to get married? Dad replied, "I don't know, son. I'm still paying."
- 2) A lady put an ad in the newspaper that read, "Husband wanted." The next day she got 200 answers to her ad. They all said the same thing, "You can have mine."
- 3) A husband read an article to his wife about how many words women use a day as opposed to how many words men say; - 30,000 to a man's 15,000. The wife replied, "The reason has to be because we have to repeat everything to men." The husband turned to his wife and said: "What?"

Besides being the feast of the Ascension, today is also the feast of St. Boniface. St. Boniface does not quite generate the kind of celebration that is usually associated with St. Patrick (whether that's good or bad, I cannot say). However, Boniface is as important to Germany as Patrick was to Ireland. When Boniface was sent to Germany, it was mostly pagan. Even the Christianity that was there was mixed with paganism. For 35 years he worked tirelessly trying to reform the Church in Germany, to educate the clergy, and to bring the people back to fidelity to the Holy Father. It was not as glorious a task as bringing people to Christ who had never heard of him (which is what Patrick did), but Boniface had the hard work of correcting and rejuvenating the faith of those who already thought they had the faith and who thought they didn't need renewal. Learning something for the first time is easier than having to unlearn what is erroneous and then learning what is correct. Often I am asked about the stained glass window we have of Boniface cutting down the tree. That tree was considered sacred to the pagan gods and everyone thought he would be struck dead if he cut it down. Those who were nearby were pagan priests apparently waiting for lightning to strike - but Boniface cut it down without anything happening. It split into four parts when it fell and he was able to use the wood to build a chapel. He not only worked in Germany but in France and in the Netherlands too. After 35 years of service to God, Boniface, along with 53 companions, were attacked and massacred by pagans on their way to the Netherlands for a Confirmation. Thus he is a martyr, his red garb symbolizes that, and we would normally wear red on his feast, but the feast of the Ascension is what we are celebrating today.

The Ascension celebrates Jesus' glorification far above every being that could be named in this age and in the one to come (as Paul says in today's second reading). As we profess each week, Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. It is not the end of his work. He tells his disciples in today's gospel, "I will be with you always, until the end of time." He showed he was with them by how the Church grew through the teaching of the apostles, through the miracles they worked and through the courage he gave them - even giving them

courage to face martyrdom for their faith.

His ascension to glory is something beyond our human abilities to understand. That is what is symbolized by the cloud that took him from their sight. yet, when Jesus' risen body entered into the world of the divine he gave us hope, for he promised us, "I am going to get a place ready for you and I will come back and take you with me, that where I am, you also may be." (John 14,3)

If we try to pinpoint the exact day for the Ascension we are unable to do so. Mark, Luke and John give us the impression in their gospels that Jesus ascended to the Father on Easter Sunday night. Luke, who also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, tells us the ascension took place 40 days after Easter. Forty is a round number that is used frequently in the Bible to give us a rough idea of how much time had passed by. Scholars tell us the ascension seems to have taken place in two stages (The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 43:198) This might be a little heavy, so please bear with me. The first stage, which according to the gospels took place on Easter Sunday night, is called the "doxological" account. The Greek word doxa means splendor, glory, honor thus according to the doxological account of the ascension, the disciples encountered Jesus a number of times, they were instructed by him, and worshipped him. Luke describes this phase of the ascension at the end of his gospel by telling us after Jesus blessed the disciples and was parted from them and was taken up to heaven, "they did him homage and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple praising God." The second stage of the ascension can be called the "ecclesiastical" account. Ecclesia means church thus according to this account the church must move beyond this period of joyful worship and frequent appearances of Jesus and begin to travel the highways of the world with the good news. That is the message of today's gospel from Matthew. Notice in today's gospel, Matthew doesn't even mention the ascension. He wants us not so much to focus on where Jesus went but to focus on what Jesus wants us to do now. St. Luke gives us the same message when the angel asks the disciples, "Why are you standing there looking at the sky?" In other words it's time to get to work boys and girls.

Matthew tells us the apostles would go forth with the Authority of Jesus; they were to go to all the nations; their ministry would be sacramental (they would baptize) and it would be a ministry of teaching people to observe all that I have commanded you. Notice the use of the word "all." "All authority," "all nations," "all that I command," "all days." The mission of the Church (which is our mission today) has no limit. Our patron St. Boniface lived that. May each of us, in our own way, do the same.

Pentecost - A Cycle

June 12, 2011

One Saturday night a minister was busy writing his sermon for Sunday. His little daughter saw him working busily and asked him what he was doing. He said he was writing his sermon. She asked, "Daddy, how do you know what to write?" He answered, "God tells me what to write."

Then she asked, "Why do you keep erasing."

Sometimes it's very clear and sometimes it's challenging to know what God is saying to us. I felt pretty much like that minister when I was trying to figure out just what I should say about the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. So much could be said (I have four or five entire books on the Holy Spirit) and yet, when we finish saying everything that could be said, we will still be dealing with the great mystery of who is the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's mysterious workings in us and in the Church. It's a great mystery because God is too awesome and too great for us to understand.

The theologian, Fr. Yves Congar, has written: "The Spirit is without a face and almost without a name. [The Spirit] is the wind who is not seen, but who makes things move. [The Spirit] is known by [the Spirit's] effects. [The Spirit] is the one who is given in order to produce everything that can be summarized as the community of the sons [and daughters] of God." Simply put: "The Spirit is the agent of the fulfillment of God's plan and work." (Congar, I Believe in the Spirit, Vol. 3 pg 144)

As this feast, this gift of the Spirit encompasses so much, I can only mention a few disconnected ideas that I feel deserve some special mention. With the coming of the Spirit the liturgy brings the Easter season to a close. Although there are two special Sundays after today, the feast of the Holy Trinity and the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, the liturgical season of Ordinary Time begins Monday.

When God's Spirit came upon the Apostles and disciples, then the Church was born. God's Spirit got things moving like a strong wind, or a fire that could not be stopped, and the Apostles began to preach, starting at Jerusalem and carrying the message of Jesus to the ends of the earth. This last statement, the growth of the Church under the direction of the Spirit, describes the basic theme of the Acts of the Apostles.

The Spirit continues to try to keep the Church united and faithful to its mission. This is one of the things Jesus especially prayed for at the Last Supper - that we all will be one. It's a point St. Paul made in his letter to the Corinthians ("in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body?") Yet we are divided into so many different versions of Christianity.

Paul has spoken at great length about the activity of the Spirit. He has told us how the Spirit calls individuals to different forms of service or ministry. We had an example of that this week when Joe Binzer was ordained to be bishop in our Archdiocese. He will be helping Archbishop Schnurr. I am very excited about the choice of Bishop Binzer. Before coming to the seminary he was a CPA. His first assignment was in a parish, but in the past eight years he has been Chancellor for the Archdiocese. I've had many contacts with him as Chancellor and he has always been a great help. He has come here many times to help with confessions or to do a wedding. I am sure he will be a great blessing for our Archdiocese. It is not just as a bishop or priest that the Spirit calls people to ministry, and I'm afraid I would bore everyone if I tried to mention all the ways the Spirit inspires people to serve God and the community, either paid or as volunteers. If I did try to name all the different ways people serve, I know I would forget to name some of those ways and then someone would feel unappreciated. You know who you are and can pat yourself on the back.

Actually, I am convinced that everyone here at Mass today is here because they have been moved by the Holy Spirit to be here. Paul said, "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord', except by the Holy Spirit." (I Cor. 12,3) The Holy Spirit helps us to believe.

Two closing thoughts: Often I have asked people if they belong to any faith, whether they have any religion. They often answer, "We don't believe in organized religion, but we are spiritual people." I never push it but I often wonder what "spiritual" means to them. Anyone who believes in God is spiritual in some sense, whether they are pagans, Hindus or Buddhists or Moslems. Even radical Moslems who go around beheading people in the name of Allah consider themselves spiritual people. Even demons are spiritual because that's what they are made of, spirit. Being spiritual says nothing special about us. What matters is whether we let God's Holy Spirit lead us, God's Holy Spirit who connects us with the Father and with Jesus and who connects us with the community of believers in Christ.

My last comment: When I speak to parents of children who are preparing for the sacrament of Confirmation, I remind them of the fruits of the Holy Spirit as identified by St. Paul. His list begins with love (not just any kind of love, but a generous, giving kind of love). He goes on to mention joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. I encourage them to help prepare their children for this sacrament so their children will be abundantly blessed with these qualities. I ask them if they would like to see more of these virtues in their children. I wish to conclude by asking you, wouldn't you like to have more of these virtues in yourself. Let us pray today for greater openness to the Spirit for Jesus tells us: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Lk. 11,13)

Feast of the Holy Trinity - A Cycle

June 19, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Exodus 34,4b-6.8-9; II Corinthians 13,11-13; John 3,16-18) Tertullian first used the word "Trinity" to describe God about the year 200 AD. The council of Nicaea adopted the term 125 years later in formulating the Creed we proclaim each week at Sunday Mass. It took a very long time for the Church Fathers and theologians to clarify this doctrine of the Trinity. There were many reasons that it took such a long time. Among the primary reasons would be 1) that belief in one God was so deeply embedded in the Jewish faith, the faith that gave birth to Christianity and 2) because three persons in one God was such an entirely new and difficult concept.

Today in our first reading we hear about Moses who lived 1300 years before Christ. At that time and for hundreds of years thereafter, all the nations that were part of the Middle East believed in many gods. The Hebrews were different. They believed there is only one God. It was part of their covenant that they worship none of the other gods of their neighbors: I am the Lord thy

God, thou shalt not have strange gods before me. In our reading today, we hear God revealing his sacred name to Moses. By giving his name, God is entering into relationship with the Hebrews and making himself accessible to them. In the Hebrew bible, that name is spelled YHWH, but it was never pronounced. That is because the Jews were afraid of even the slightest risk of using God's sacred name in vain (which the second commandment forbade). So whenever YHWH came up in the text, they always substituted the title "Lord" as we hear in today's first reading. God's self-revelation to Moses in today's reading is that God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity; characteristics of God that appear also in today's gospel. It is interesting that those who espouse inclusive language in today's politically correct society like to call God "he/she" yet they have no difficulty referring to the devil as "he."

HOMILY: Three boys were bragging about their fathers. The first boasted that his dad owned a farm. The second said his dad owned a factory. The third boy, a pastor's son, replied: "That's nothin'. My dad owns hell." "No way!" one of the boys said. "Nobody can own hell." The preacher's son said, "Well, my dad does. I heard mom tell grandma that the church council gave it to him last night." (Joyful Noiseletter, June-July, 1994, pg 2)

A small boy who had been a Dennis the Menace all day was saying bedtime prayers with his dad. After a short prayer, the little boy asked his dad to leave him alone so he could talk to God by himself. Dad asked, "What have you done that you don't want me to know about." "If I tell you," the boy said, "you'll get angry and shout and yell, but God will listen, forgive me and forget about it." (Ibidem, pg 2) The parable of the Prodigal Son (also sometimes called the parable of the Prodigal Father) somewhat resembles that story. Happy Fathers' Day to all our fathers - whether actual fathers or those who play the role of father in someone's life.

Today we reflect on one of the basic mysteries of our faith, the Holy Trinity. One of the most important things about a mystery is that we can know some things about it but we cannot understand it fully. That is the way the Trinity has always been and always will be as long as we live in this world. God is too great for our minds to understand. It should not be a mystery to us that God is too great for us to fully understand for we could only fully understand God if we were on the same level as God is, and we're not. In God's kingdom we will see God as God is and then we will not need to understand for we will be captivated by all that God is and we will be filled with enough awe and love to last us forever.

I could talk for a long time or for a short time, but I could never explain this mystery. We have to take it on faith, a faith which has Jesus Christ for its foundation. It is from Jesus we have learned of the Father and the Spirit and it is from him that we have learned that he and the Father are one (John 10,30). It is from him we have learned that "he who sees me sees also the Father." (John 14,9) It is by his command that we have been baptized "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." He taught us to call God our Father. Of course, we can pray to any one of the three persons, or we can pray to all three persons at once as we do at Mass. At Mass we direct our prayers to the Father through our Lord, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.

As I'm sure most of you know, there are going to be some changes in the words of the prayers we say at Mass. These changes attempt to improve and refine the translation of the Mass that was made after Vatican II. Our creed will be changed from "we believe" to "I believe." It is still the faith of the entire Church, but it stresses our own personal profession of that faith. It also is similar to the "I believe" which begins the Apostles Creed, an expression of our faith that goes back almost to the time of the Apostles. Now we say we believe that Jesus is "one in being with the Father." A more precise theological term will be introduced here: Jesus is "consubstantial with the Father." This means he is of the same substance or the same essence as the Father. It stresses more clearly Jesus' divinity. Another more precise theological term we will soon use is to say that Jesus was "incarnate of the Virgin Mary" rather than saying Jesus was "born of the Virgin Mary". This is saying that the Son of God, who was divine from all eternity, took on our human flesh at the moment of his conception when the angel appeared to Mary and said she would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit. This just gives you a tiny view of what is ahead, but don't get nervous, there are not a lot of big words that will be unfamiliar to us. I wanted to mention this because I was talking about the creed. The Trinity is a mystery for us now, but rest assured, the time will come when it will all make sense and the joy it will bring us will be fantastic. Amen.

The Body and Blood of Christ - A Cycle

June 26, 2011

INTRODUCTION - (Deuteronomy 8,2-3.14b-16a; I Corinthians 10,16-17; John 6,51-58)

The setting for our first reading is on the east side of the Jordan River across from the Promised Land. Moses' job of leading the people of God is just about finished. He is giving them some last minute instructions before they cross the Jordan and enter the Land and he goes off to his eternal reward. His fear is that the people, once they get comfortable in this new land, will become complacent and forget the God on whom they depend. So he tells them to remember - remember the journey from Egypt, remember the long time they spent in the desert and especially remember the food with which God fed them - the manna. This reading (especially the mention of manna) is meant to introduce us to the main focus of today's feast - how God sustains us with the flesh and blood of his Son, Jesus, the bread of life.

HOMILY: A tough old cowboy told his grandson that the secret to long life was sprinkling a little gunpowder on his oatmeal every morning. The grandson did this religiously and, sure enough, lived to the ripe old age of 93. When he died, he left behind 10 children, 28 grandchildren, 35 great grandchildren and a 15-foot hole in the wall of the crematorium. (from Reader's Digest, Laughter, the Best Medicine, pg. 199)

There's even a better secret to a long life than putting gunpowder on your breakfast cereal: it is Jesus' teaching about eternal life in today's gospel.

Imagine that you went to your doctor for a routine physical. The doctor saw some things she was concerned about and sent you to get some tests. The tests came back with very bad news. The doctor told you that the tests showed you would have only about six months to live and the tests were highly reliable and accurate. But the doctor said she has discovered a special medicine that would cure the problem. She promised you if you took this medicine, a medicine with no troubling side effects, you would in all likelihood enjoy good health for another 20 or 30 years. You've known your doctor for years, you know she is very knowledgeable and you've always trusted her. How much time would you spend dealing with all the doubts that flood your mind? Would you be foolish to trust or foolish not to trust? What you decide to do may all come down to that: trust.

Jesus tells us in today's gospel, if we want to live forever, we must eat his body and drink his blood? Would we be foolish to trust what he tells us or foolish not to trust it. The Jews who first heard him asked: "How can that be?" A reasonable question! We still ask it. But the answer is beyond reason, it is answered only by faith. Jesus said it and he said it in the clearest possible terms. When his hearers questioned I, he repeated what he had said and said it more emphatically: "Amen, amen, I say to you (whenever he prefixes a statement with 'Amen, amen' he's saying this is really serious). Then he said "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you."

If you look up today's gospel passage in your Bibles, you will see that after Jesus insisted we must eat his body and drink his blood in order to have eternal life, many of his followers started walking away, saying to themselves that he was out of his mind. What is important here is what Jesus didn't do. The gospel tells us he didn't call them back. He didn't say, "wait, don't take me literally." He didn't say, "you misunderstand me - I don't mean you really have to eat my body and drink my blood." Jesus just let them go; he knew they understood him perfectly.

The apostles, however, stayed with him even though they didn't understand what he was saying any more than anyone else. When Jesus asked them, "Do you also want to leave?" Peter answered: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

It is quite marvelous how Jesus devised a way to feed us with his own flesh and blood. He has given us the Eucharist, which is his real presence. The Eucharist is truly his body and blood. Yet it remains a mystery for us and we are still asking, "How can this be?" It all comes down to faith, faith in the one who tells us, "This is my body. This is my blood."

I think this is the biggest challenge to our faith in the Church today. It is also the biggest comfort to those who believe. Once we are truly convinced that the Eucharist is Jesus' body and blood, then it is much easier for us to see how it is the source of eternal life for us. Jesus gave us a simple image to help us see how, through the Eucharist, he brings us eternal life. He told us, "I am the vine, you are the branches." By our union with him which endures and is nourished through the Eucharist, his divine life flows into us.

Moses told God's people not to forget what God had done for them. Today's feast inspires us not to forget what Jesus does and continues to do for us through the Eucharist. Amen.