

The Ascension of the Lord (B)
(Acts 1:1-11 / Mark 16:15-20)
17.05.2015
Presence / Absence

The Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel according to Mark describe the Ascension as Jesus being “taken up into heaven”, “lifted up into the sky”. The image is clear and yet it is also a bit confusing. If Jesus is up in heaven how can he be with us, how can he be within us? What does it mean for Jesus to be “with us always” (Mt 28:20) while he is up in the sky?

Because the Lord “who has promised is faithful” (Hb 10:33), we believe that he is truly with us always. God is never absent. To think that God could be absent from our world is a denial of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Because God became man and took flesh, our human flesh, he is forever present to us in our world. God committed himself to us forever.

As human beings, we struggle with presence and absence, these two important realities tear us apart. Since our birth, since that day when we were literally cut off from our mother, we are prone to experience all separations as abandonment, all departures as forms of rejection, and all estrangements as harbingers of loneliness.

Like children who do not want to be left alone, we behave sometimes as if we are in need of constant reassurance that we are not abandoned or rejected.

Because of our limitations and sinfulness, our way of relating to others, of being present to them, is too often associated with negative connotations: we are present to others for our self-gratification, we are present to others because we need them, because they are useful to us, because they satisfy a particular need within us or quieten an inner fear. Fusion, confusion, use, abuse and manipulation are the distinctive marks of our wounded way of being present to others.

While some may wonder what the Ascension of the Lord really means for us today... I believe that this feast has something to say about the way we relate to God and to others; this feast is about our inner feelings of loneliness and rejection.

In the Gospel of John we have these very important words of Jesus to Mary Magdalene in the garden of the Resurrection: “Do not hold on to me because I have not yet ascended to the Father” (20:17). The temptation for us is, and will always be, to hold on to God and to people in ways that do not respect their freedom and ours.

What is really at stake here is that real presence implies distance, selflessness and humility. In some situations, there is nothing to be done, nothing to be said, the only effort for us is to forget ourselves in order to be totally present to the other, to what he feels, to what she is going through. Often the desire to be really present to somebody else will inevitably lead us to a place where we will realise anew that we are not in control and that we cannot fix everything.

We are human beings and it is obvious that for us presence and absence are linked with physical and exterior signs. And yet the guarantee of a real presence should not be exclusively linked to these physical and exterior signs.

At a time when we look for security and certitudes, we may put pressure on others to phone us every day or to text us every two hours in order not to feel abandoned or lonely. Implicitly we may say: “If you love me, not only you have to think of me all the time, but you have to let me know that you think of me.”

The Ascension of Jesus tells us that things are not so simple. Jesus' departure is a call for us to rely to him in freedom and in faith. Sometimes people say: "It would be easier if God was present to us here and now, visibly present to us"... this is not God's way, he cannot impose himself or coerce us into believing in him. Jesus' Ascension does not make him absent, on the contrary it is the guarantee that he is present to all of us in a new way, in a real way which has its foundations in faith and love.

There will always be a leap of faith and trust in a loving relationship. The call to love cannot but leave the two partners free. If there is no freedom, no trust, then there can be no real love and no real presence.

This feast is a call for us to think about the way we are present to others and how we expect others to be present to us. We may be with somebody and as soon as the mobile phone rings we answer it or immediately take the decision to answer a very important text message... as if all text messages require an immediate answer. We may be in a group, completely disconnected from what is going on, allowing our mind to wander, reading a newspaper or humming a song. The strange thing is that while we feel free to be absent at times, we expect others to be always present to us. They have to be there for us while we may not be there for them.

The Ascension of the Lord tells us that presence and absence depend on the heart. Feelings of rejection, abandonment and loneliness do not depend primarily on the fact that we are on our own or surrounded by people but they depend first on the inner conviction that we are loved. The ultimate question is Jesus' question to Peter: "Do you love me?" (Jn 21:16)

If we love one another, then we are present to one another; if we love, we are united beyond time and space, beyond all forms of separation. Even death has lost its power and, in the Risen Lord, it cannot separate those who love one another.

St Paul's words could be considered as the best caption for the icon of the Ascension that is in our church today: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (...) No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rm 8:35.37-39).

As the Spirit makes Christ present in the bread and the wine during our Eucharist, let us call for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit of love into our hearts (Cf. Rm 5:5), upon all of us so that we may be really present to God and to one another.