

The Ascension of the Lord (C)

(Acts 1:1-11 / Luke 24:46-53)

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*Worship & Mission*

The Ascension of the Lord must have been a life-changing experience for the disciples. The sequence of events: death of Jesus, apparitions and Ascension of the Lord must have led them on a kind of emotional and spiritual roller coaster.

What seemed particularly important for St Luke is that, just after the Ascension, the disciples “were continually in the Temple praising God”. We could say that in order to deal with the absence of Jesus, the disciples felt the need to gather together in the place where God was present, the Temple in Jerusalem. For them, to come together for worship was a way to acknowledge Christ’s physical absence as a possibility for a renewed relationship, a new form of presence.

What characterises the first group of Christians is that, as we read in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, “they spent much time together in the Temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts” (2:46). Here the important word is “together”. And this characteristic is as important today as it was for the early Christian community. To worship together was – and is – an essential element of our Christian identity.

Is it really? We have many Catholics today who no longer participate in liturgical celebrations. They may come to church for baptisms, weddings, funerals, month’s minds but otherwise we do not see them.

However what seems to me to be even more pernicious and more damaging for the life of our communities is not so much those who do not come to church regularly but those who transform the act of worship into an individualistic devotion or religious habit.

We have to be careful, our Sunday Eucharistic celebrations are meant not only to nourish our individual relationship with God. From the earliest days of the Church, participating in the communal celebration of the Lord’s Supper was recognised as a manifestation and intensification of the community’s shared life in Christ.

The public expression of our belonging to Christ is found in our belonging to one another as we gather for worship.

From that perspective, when they gathered together, the first disciples could rely on Jesus’ promise: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt 18:20). Christ is present to our gathering, not only because of his presence in the Sacrament and in the Scriptures, but because he is present to each one of us, within each one of us. The Christian tradition has always considered the times of common worship to be privileged opportunities for the faithful to grow in their love and knowledge of God, and to go deeper in their experience of being members one of another.

This is why the Ascension is not a call for us to keep on staring into the sky, to keep our eyes fixed on a celestial realm where Christ might be thought of as now living exclusively.

Through his Ascension, Christ opens up an infinite variety of presences, differing in kinds and modes but all life-giving and life-enhancing.

Now the Ascension of the Lord sets out in front of us two challenges: the first one is to discern the Lord’s presence in every place and time, in all those we meet and in all the events of our lives. That is what contemplative life is about. St Benedict was certainly a master in contemplation, not because he was always staring into the sky but because he knew

and loved the Lord so much that he was able to see him in all men and women, to recognise his features on all human faces. This explains why the times of worship which punctuate the day are so important for Benedictine monks today. When we gather together into the Church for worship, through our common listening to the Word of God and the celebration of the Sacraments, we learn who Christ is and we become like him.

The second challenge is precisely to become so Christlike that we can make the Lord's presence visible by our whole lives, by our witness, preaching and missionary zeal (cf. Benedict XVI, 24.05.2009).

We have to be the presence of Christ in the world and it is our responsibility to bear witness to him wherever we are, whatever we do. When people look at us, what do they see? Do they discern Christ present in their midst?

After the Ascension, St Luke tells us that the disciples were "full of joy". Today we may have personal reasons for feeling lonely and downcast, and there may be circumstances around us which burden and sadden us. Yet this feast is an opportunity for us to remember that we are not alone, that Christ is with us always. We do not have to stare into the sky, he is within us. And if it is difficult for us to connect with Christ's presence in the sanctuary of our hearts, then this celebration, this gathering should be a reminder that there are brothers and sisters around us who are ready to bear witness to the loving kindness of our God for us.

Together let us bring our lives to the altar, let us help one another to carry, together, all that is good and pleasant and all that is not so good and heavy. Everything has its place in our celebration because everything which is part of our lives matters to God and because everything can be redeemed and transformed by the Spirit.