

The Ascension of the Lord

I think today's feast of the Ascension is one of the most neglected and misunderstood in the Liturgical Calendar. We ought to pay this wonderful feast much greater respect and begin to understand clearly what it is all about.

In fact what we are celebrating is an extremely crucial moment in God's plan of salvation. We are commemorating the moment that Jesus returned to the Father and handed the continuation of his great work over to us, the Church.

The Gospels tell us all about the public ministry of Jesus and how he gave his life for us on the Cross and then how he rose from the dead and later, as we have heard in recent Sundays, how he appeared to the disciples.

Then come the Ascension when Jesus gave the Apostles their final instructions to go out to the whole world in order to proclaim the Good News and Baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. He then withdrew from them and returned to his Father in Heaven.

We are therefore commemorating two important events, the return of Jesus to the Father upon accomplishing his work of salvation and the entrusting of the continuance of his work to the Church. Let us take these in turn.

In dealing with his return to the Father we are implicitly acknowledging that Jesus first of all came from the Father, and that he was sent by him to implement the Father's plan of salvation. All that he did while here on earth was in order to fulfill the will of the Father. And this includes his miracles, his teaching and eventually his passion

The important thing therefore is that this work of salvation is truly the work of God entrusted to his Son Jesus, who when his task is accomplished

returns to his rightful place at the side of the Father.

So, Jesus' miracles are the actual work of God, not any other miraculous power and his teaching is the true teaching of God and not some made-up message.

Then at the very end of his ministry the whole work of Jesus is validated by his return to his rightful place in heaven.

Images of the Ascension seem to focus on Jesus going up to heaven or sometimes, as in medieval works of art, showing his feet sticking through a cloud.

But really these images should be of the Son taking his seat at the right hand of the Father, returning to the place from which he first came.

Now while we are focusing on Christ having completed his work we are also invited to think about the beginning of the work of the Church. For although Christ accomplished all that he was sent to do, that is not quite the end of the story; for now it is the task of the Church to spread this Good News to the entire world and to incorporate all believers into the Church through Baptism.

We can summarize this by saying that the Ascension means that the work of Christ is done, while the work of the Church begins.

You might think to yourself that Christ should have stayed on a bit and brought everyone to faith in him and only then returned to the Father and that would be the true completion of his work.

But this would violate the Father's plan that all people should 'freely' worship him.

The lesson of the incarnation is that the Father wants us to be saved by one like ourselves and logically this leads to us hearing the Good News not from some Divine Being but from the lips of our brothers and sisters.

And it is for this reason that the Church is given its task to proclaim the Gospel to the whole of creation.

Christ achieves the work of salvation; while we are the ones whose privileged task it is to tell our brothers and sisters about it and so enable them to freely embrace it.

Christ has returned to the right hand of God but we are his ambassadors here on earth. And it was on the Day of the Ascension that this great task was laid on our shoulders. But this huge responsibility was not given to us without support from above.

As Jesus says, I will not leave you orphans. Yes he has returned to the Father but this is to simply reassume his glory, his place at the center of power. And it is from this place that he can reassume his majesty and exercise influence over the whole of creation.

By returning to the Father, Jesus is more able to be with us, more able to guide us, more able to work through us. We do not see him any more in human form as the Apostles did, but he is nonetheless with us.

His word speaks through us, we work powerful miracles in his name and extraordinary conversions occur as a result of his intervention. Yes, Jesus has gone from us but only so that he can be with us in a much more powerful and universal way. **Amen.**