

Lift me up, O Lord, to gaze heavenward, descend inward, go outward!

The Ascension of the Lord – Cycle A – May 24, 2020

Acts 1:1-11; Eph 1:17-23; Mt 28:16-20.

“Go therefore, make disciples of all nations.... And remember, I am with you always” (Mt)

Prologue: The life of Christ has run a full circle: from heaven to earth and back. Our Lord’s Incarnation and Ascension are the points of origin and destiny, which remain for us, his followers, milestones that map our life’s journey. Celebrating the Ascension of Our Lord, we can focus on three milestones in the readings and reflections: (a) Galilee and Jerusalem; (b) Heaven; (c) My lifeline.

Three Signposts from Scripture:

1. “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” (Acts 1:11) ask two angels of Jesus’ disciples after they witness Jesus’ ascent into heaven. The first reading from the Acts tells us that Jesus appeared to his disciples many times “during forty days” and instructed his disciples “not to leave Jerusalem.” ‘Forty’ is a symbolic figure not meant to be a calculation of the Risen Lord’s earthly existence, but it is significant as a period of ‘formation for mission’. For example, Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai to receive instructions from God (Ex 24:18) and Jesus prepared himself for mission forty days in the desert (Mt 4:2). ‘Jerusalem’ too stands as the centre from which the Christian faith spreads. Jesus instructs his disciples: “You are to be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed *to the ends of the earth*” (v.8). Interestingly, all the three readings of today have a note of universality. Jesus’ resurrection and ascension are not two disparate salvific events but two sides of the same coin. Jesus disappears from their sight, but the angels prophesy: “This same Jesus will come back in the same way as you have seen him go.” This refers to his second coming at the end of time.
2. The gospel passage is the so-called ‘*Great Commission*’ which appears as the climax of Matthew’s gospel (28:16-20). The eleven disciples “went to *Galilee*, to the *mountain* to which Jesus had directed them” (v.16). Galilee is significant to this group who were called in this area while they were fishing, mending their nets, tending to tax-booths, etc. In Galilee they experienced Jesus tell fascinating parables, teach them prayers, touch lepers, heal the sick, raise the dead, befriend Samaritans, warn the rich, praise the poor, challenge the scribes, challenge ritualism, etc. In Biblical imagery mountains are significant since they are sites of the God-human encounter wherein God reveals Godself (as at Sinai/Horeb, Zion, etc.). This is going to be the last encounter of Jesus face-to-face with his disciples. Hence, he will now reveal a missionary plan to them and hand over the baton to them to take over from where he stopped due to his death. Even at this final, farewell encounter, “they worshipped him, but some doubted” (v.17). This shows the humanity and frailty of the Matthean community who are nonetheless called to be Jesus’ disciples.
3. It’s important to remember that this is a ‘*com-mission*’, literally, a ‘mission *with*’ God. It is *not* the disciples who have initiated the mission and will ensure its final fulfillment, but God! Here, Jesus confidently says: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (v.18). It is with this authority that Christ sends out his disciples to “*Go!*” and “make disciples of all nations”—meaning, they are to inspire many more to ‘*be*’ Jesus in the world:

kind, loving, caring, joyful, compassionate, forgiving, courageous, prophetic and self-sacrificing. In so doing, they are told not to fear anything or anyone; but to: “Remember, I *am* with you always, to the end of the age.” A promise for an ever-abiding presence.

Linking the Second Reading and the Psalm to the Ascension Theme:

- In the 2nd reading from ch. 1 of Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, he asserts “the immeasurable greatness of his [Christ’s] power for us who believe” (v.19) which is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion... not only in this age, but also in the age to come” (v.21). This echoes Jesus’ promise of presence in the gospel commission. He also reminds the believers that Christ is seated at God’s right hand with “all things under his feet” (v.22).
- The psalm – classified as an ‘enthronement psalm’ traditionally used for the Jewish Festival designated the ‘Enthronement of Yahweh’ – also proclaims, “God is king of all the earth!” It’s an honour to be on ‘*com*-mission’ with God as King and Jesus as Lord of *all* the earth.

Three Milestones in Our Own Pilgrimage from Earth to Heaven:

Galilee: could symbolically stand for each one’s encounter with the crucified-risen Lord. It could refer to our youth when we felt drawn to follow Christ and set off in his footsteps. Through life’s ups and downs we’ve reached where we are today. With the covid-19 pandemic, we experience much doubt, darkness, sickness and uncertainty. Remember: “I *am* with you.”

Heaven: is the final fulfillment we seek to be united eternally to God. While being rooted in our present context, our gaze must also be heavenward. We are only pilgrims on this earth, restless, for our hearts were made for God and will only find our rest in Him. (St Augustine).

Discipleship: entails descending inward to understand what God wants of me, today. Then, moving outward to ‘be witnesses’ and ‘make disciples’ of every nation. Our call to be ‘catholic’ means to be ‘universal’. Thus, no place, no time, no person, no event falls ‘outside’ the ambit of God’s salvific scheme perfected in Jesus’ passion-death-resurrection-ascension. *Gaudium et Spes* (n.22) of Vatican Council II asserts: “In a manner known only to God, the Holy Spirit offers to *every person* the possibility of being associated with Jesus’ paschal mystery.” Therefore, Jesus’ “make disciples of every nation” mandate of today’s gospel implies that each and every Christian must “Go!” and ‘*be*’ other Christs, worldwide.

In Lighter Vein:

Shraddhanand often boasted about his deep faith in God. Once, a powerful storm arose and the rains threatened to flood Shraddhanand’s house. A fireman rushed in and said, “Come, I’ll carry you away!” Pointing upward, Shraddhanand exclaimed, “Jesus is the way!” The downpour continued and the waters reached Shraddhanand’s waist. A fisherman rowed by and cried, “Jump in, I’ll steer you to safety!” Gazing heavenward, Shraddhanand retorted, “Only Jesus saves!” Later, rising rainwater forced Shraddhanand to climb onto the roof. The pilot of a helicopter hovering overhead shouted, “I’ll help you!” Shraddhanand replied: “I trust in God alone!” Shraddhanand drowned in the raging waters. In heaven, he complained: “Lord, I trusted you, but you abandoned me!” God replied, “No, I didn’t! I tried to save you disguised as fireman, fisherman and pilot. Why didn’t you do anything besides gazing heavenward?”

Prayer: “*Lift me up, O Lord, that I might gaze heavenward, descend inward, go outward, Amen!*”
