

Homily

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ASCENSION 2019

Our scientifically sophisticated and contemporary modern understanding of the world, impacts upon us, in making the Ascension rather difficult for us to comprehend. After all, surely if you go up and up into the sky, you don't go up into heaven at all, but you just end up going into outer space. So, what was it that the apostles witnessed at the Ascension and what does the Ascension actually teach us? Well, [as Fr. Ncedo often says...] there's another story about Jesus which has a number of parallels with the Ascension and that can shed some light on this question. This is the story of Jesus' Transfiguration.

Both the Transfiguration and the Ascension took place on a mountain, and this is significant, because mountains are the kind of place that God likes to reveal Himself. In the OT, both Moses and Elijah had personal encounters with God whilst up a mountain. Furthermore, in both the

Transfiguration and the Ascension, something very dramatic happened to Jesus - in the Transfiguration, His appearance changed and His clothes became dazzling white, and in the Ascension, He ascended into heaven. Thus, both events reveal something of the glory of Christ which is normally hidden from people's eyes.

It's also significant that a cloud is mentioned in both stories, for in the bible a cloud often depicts the presence of God. We're told this very explicitly in the book of Exodus, where the Israelites were said to have been led by the Lord in a pillar of cloud. The Transfiguration and the Ascension are very reminiscent of this.

In the Transfiguration, a cloud overshadowed them and they heard a voice in the cloud saying "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" and in the Ascension, a cloud took Jesus from their view. So, the cloud is very symbolic of Jesus' intimate relationship with His heavenly Father.

Another similarity is that in both the Transfiguration and the Ascension, two men

appeared: Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration, and two mysterious men in white at the Ascension. At the Transfiguration, Peter wanted to make three booths in some kind of vain attempt to hang onto this experience rather than see it as a preparation for something greater; Peter wasn't at all ready for Jesus' departure.

When it came to the Ascension, the apostles were still not entirely ready. As St. Luke recounts, the apostles were left amazed staring into heaven, and they had to be told by the two men in white 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

Jesus spoke with Moses and Elijah about His departure at His Transfiguration, and this departure was fully realized at His Ascension, but it was not a departure that left His disciples abandoned. In fact, the Greek word St. Luke uses for departure in his account of the Transfiguration is the word Exodus. Thus, St. Luke wants us to

understand the Ascension in the light of the Exodus story. Jesus' departure is about leading His people into freedom, into the Promised Land.

Jesus' departure was difficult for the apostles to accept, but their experience of the Transfiguration and the Ascension helped them to grow up in spiritual maturity so that they could witness to the power of God's redeeming works.

The Transfiguration gave the apostles the courage to accompany Jesus to Jerusalem where they would witness His terrible suffering and death on the Cross, and the Ascension prepared the apostles for Pentecost, that defining moment when the Holy Spirit inspired the apostles to go out into the streets and give witness to the glory of Christ's death and resurrection.

It was at the Ascension, that the apostles came to realize that Jesus Christ had been exalted to the heights of heaven, and although it's difficult to express what it must have been like to come to this

realization, the point is not to dwell on exactly what the apostles experienced, but to dwell on what was promised. The promise of the Ascension is that since Christ has been exalted to the heights of heaven, we too can share in this exultation.

When Jesus' disciples witnessed His Transfiguration, they didn't leave rejoicing because as yet they weren't at all ready to share in the glory that they had witnessed. But after the Ascension, the disciples did leave rejoicing, because it was only then that they began to realize that what had happened to Jesus was going to happen to them.

Thus, our hope in our celebration of the Ascension, is that we too will be raised up with Christ and be glorified with Him, and this is certainly a cause for great rejoicing.

But on a more practical level, today's solemnity also teaches us the value of waiting and contemplating. In our speedy, digital age, waiting is harder than doing. Simply waiting for something goes against the grain and we try to avoid it. We could

learn from other cultures that have a more relaxed attitude towards time.

Waiting is an unavoidable part of life. Everything has its own pace, its own rhythm. There is no point in getting impatient with the pace of others on whom we rely for help. It can also serve us well, if we learn something by having to wait that we might not otherwise have learnt.

Today's celebration of the Ascension, also inaugurates the start of a special time of waiting... waiting for the descent and the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told his friends to wait in Jerusalem for the great gift they would need for their future work of sharing the Gospel. His words were, "Stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high." Some of them might have wanted to get straight down to work, feeling there was no time to waste.

But he told them to take their time, to wait. He was asking them to tune in to God's time, rather than rush ahead. It was God's will they were meant to do, not their own. Having to wait until Pentecost was a

necessary step. They could only do God's work when God's special gift was given and received.

We too need to wait on the Lord: The words of Jesus apply to us also, "You shall be my witnesses." We are to be his visible, bodily ambassadors in the world. To do this we need God's prompting Spirit, and for that we need to pray. The first disciples had to wait "until you are clothed with power from on high." After Jesus left them, they returned to Jerusalem and were "continually in the Temple praising God."

The Acts shows them gathered in an upper room, joining in prayer. For us too, waiting on the Lord takes the form of prayer, when we open ourselves to receive what we need to be his witnesses in the world.

Like the apostles and our Blessed Lady waiting for Pentecost, we are waiting on for the Spirit. Our prayer is more a quiet listening than asking for what we want. This prayer of waiting needs a quiet heart, and silence expresses it better than words. Waiting for others can be full of

loving anticipation. The Ascension invites us to enter into that prayerful waiting as we prepare for Pentecost next Sunday.