

ASCENSION OF THE LORD (Cycle A)

May 4, 2008 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

I love to read. It seems like every horizontal surface in my house is covered up with stacks of books. I've usually got three or four books going at the same time – but I always need to have a few others handy just in case . . . well, in case of what, I don't know. I guess in case I need another book. I usually take a book with me wherever I go so I've got something to read, just in case I have any "down-time."

Sometimes I think I ought to have just three stacks. A good-sized stack called "books I have read." A little bigger stack called "books I'm going to read." And a huge stack called "books I'm never going to read." The thought of moving terrifies me . . . just the books will take an extra truck.

Someone (Thomas B. Macaulay (1800-1859), Poet, Historian, Essayist, Statesman) once said, "I would rather be a poor man in a garret with plenty of books than a king who did not love reading." That's me.

MOVE

I'll let you in on a secret . . . those of you who really know me already know this . . . I don't just read scripture and theological and spiritual stuff. I read a lot of history, and even some fiction if it's something I'm interested in.

Sometimes I feel a little twinge of sadness when I finish a book . . . turn that last page, close the cover – a feeling that I'll never again be able to read this book for the first time. One of my favorites is Patrick O'Brian's twenty-volume

series about the adventures of Captain Jack Aubrey and Doctor Stephen Maturin – the “Master and Commander” series. When I finished it, I felt like that . . . sort of like I was saying goodbye to a couple of old friends. Although I’ve read the series several times since then, it’s never the same as reading it for the first time . . . that sense of anticipation, wondering what’s going to happen next.

MOVE

Today, we open a new book. Our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles marks the beginning of a new book, a new chapter in salvation history. The book of Acts is sort of “The Gospel of Luke, Part II: A New Beginning.” The Gospel never really ends, of course. We never close that book. But in a sense, today we open a new one. The beginning of the Acts of the Apostles is a sort of a transition – from Jesus as the primary revealer, to the descent of the Holy Spirit, who continues as revealer. We turn the page and open a new book.

If you remember back to January, when we shifted from the Christmas season to Ordinary time – we heard a reading from the Gospel according to John. John the Baptist proclaimed, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. . . . he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.” Today we see the Ascension of the Lord into heaven, which sets the stage for the gift of the Holy Spirit next Sunday.

For the last forty days, the Apostles have been blessed with a number of apparitions, appearances of the risen Lord, concrete encounters with the Lord after He had “passed through death.” He continued to teach them. He still had a lot to teach them, to reveal to them, to make sure they

understood. Even today, just before the Ascension, they're still on this thing of "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

MOVE

Today is the last appearance of the Lord on this Earth. Next Sunday is Pentecost. We will hear the sound "like a strong driving wind," and see the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles as "tongues of fire." The Apostles will hear all the languages of the Earth in a way that they understand each one.

But before we get there, we see in today's Gospel the final appearance of the risen Lord on Earth. It's no accident that this takes place "on a mountain." Jesus' great sermon was preached on a mountain. The Transfiguration took place on a mountain. Now Jesus is back on the mountain for the last time. This is important. Well, it's all important, but this is *really* important.

Today, he gives us our "marching orders." The Great Commission – "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

Notice that one of the things he tells us to do is to baptize. We didn't really hear much about Baptism in the public ministry of Jesus, other than John baptizing in the Jordan. But today He tells us to baptize. This is how we bring the Lord to those who did not have a first-hand encounter with Christ.

This passage in Matthew is the only place in Scripture where we hear the Trinitarian formula for baptism – in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. But we know that’s how Christians did it from the very earliest days. Some of you may have read a document called the *Didache*, or “the teaching of the twelve.” It’s not part of the Bible, but it gives a brief account of how the early Christians did things. It describes the practice of Trinitarian baptism.

The *Didache* is an interesting story in itself. For centuries, it was thought to have been lost. It was mentioned in other texts, but no copy of it was known to exist until 1873, when a copy was found in an old library in Constantinople . . . or Istanbul, as we call it now. That copy was almost a thousand years old, but the text itself dated maybe as far back as the late first century – perhaps when people who knew Jesus were still alive.

MOVE

We are commissioned, directed, ordered, to teach and preach the Gospel and baptize others, and make disciples of all nations – *all nations*. This is an important point. It makes it clear what is expected of us, but it also marks a significant change in salvation history. Up until this point, Jesus’ ministry was centered on the Chosen People, the people of Israel, the people of the Old Covenant. Now he commissions his disciples – us – to take the Good News to all nations. Next Sunday, we’ll see how Pentecost will make that possible.

The Ascension of Jesus is also a sign and an invitation for us. Christ shows us the way to heaven: by following Him and obeying his commandments. A couple of weeks ago, Thomas said “Lord, we do not know where you are going.”

Thomas was confused. He thought he saw a future without Christ, perhaps even a Christ who would be lost to him forever.

But now he understands at last. Christ shows him and the other ten apostles the way. The followers of Jesus – that’s us – we are no longer strangers in a strange land. This world is not our home. We are pilgrims on this Earth, we are missionaries, traveling toward our true home, calling others to come along with us.

MOVE

The Jehovah’s Witnesses came to see me the other day. I’ve been in the Jehovah’s Witness Protection Program for quite a while, but somehow they found me, so now I guess I have to move and change my identity again.

But seriously, that’s one thing missionaries do. Traditionally, Catholics haven’t gone door-to-door much, at least not in this part of the country. That’s one way to fulfill the great commission, but there are many others.

Another way is to do it without words, through works of charity. Bringing more souls to Christ is the greatest act of charity we can do. Practicing the virtue of charity renews us, invigorates us, reinforces our faith. And it sometimes brings others to Christ.

So . . . “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?” . . . I mean, Men of Memphis, why are you sitting there looking at me? “This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.” In other words, get to work!

But please do stay here for another half-hour or so. Plenty of time to get to work after that.

Our Christian witness in the world is our sign and acceptance of Christ's invitation. That is one way in which the Lord is "exalted" on this Earth.

Reading 1

Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus,
I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught
until the day he was taken up,
after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit
to the apostles whom he had chosen.
He presented himself alive to them
by many proofs after he had suffered,
appearing to them during forty days
and speaking about the kingdom of God.
While meeting with them,
he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem,
but to wait for “the promise of the Father
about which you have heard me speak;
for John baptized with water,
but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

When they had gathered together they asked him,
“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”
He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons
that the Father has established by his own authority.
But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,
throughout Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.”
When he had said this, as they were looking on,
he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.
While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going,
suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them.
They said, “Men of Galilee,
why are you standing there looking at the sky?
This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven
will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.”

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9

R. (6) God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.

or:

R. Alleluia.

All you peoples, clap your hands,
shout to God with cries of gladness,
For the LORD, the Most High, the awesome,
is the great king over all the earth.

R. God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.

or:

R. Alleluia. God mounts his throne amid shouts of joy;

the LORD, amid trumpet blasts.

Sing praise to God, sing praise;

sing praise to our king, sing praise.

R. God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.

or:

R. Alleluia.

For king of all the earth is God;

sing hymns of praise.

God reigns over the nations,

God sits upon his holy throne.

R. God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.

or:

R. Alleluia.

Reading II

Eph 1:17-23

Brothers and sisters:

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,

give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation

resulting in knowledge of him.

May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened,

that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call,

what are the riches of glory

in his inheritance among the holy ones,

and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe,

in accord with the exercise of his great might,

which he worked in Christ,

raising him from the dead

and seating him at his right hand in the heavens,

far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion,

and every name that is named

not only in this age but also in the one to come.

And he put all things beneath his feet

and gave him as head over all things to the church,
which is his body,
the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

Gospel

Mt 28:16-20

The eleven disciples went to Galilee,
to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them.
When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted.
Then Jesus approached and said to them,
“All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father,
and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.
And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”