

Today's Feast of the Ascension of the Lord is more an account of a commissioning when Jesus says to the Apostles, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

In the First Reading, St. Luke writes about Jesus' Ascension as a visible going up into the sky, which occurred forty days after the Resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is lifted up to where God dwells. The cloud is a symbol of the Divine and refers to the coming of the Son of Man at the end of time on "a cloud with power and great glory" (Luke 21:27).

The Ascension itself is a sign that the mission of Jesus on this earth is completed. There is a change of purpose among the Apostles. Instead of being disciples who are focused on the physical presence of Jesus, they are now *sent forth* to continue the mission of Jesus.

The angel's word to the Apostles is "why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" This is the pivot point and the activity of the young Catholic Church which will spread out from it in circles as the Apostles give witness in Judea and Samaria, Rome and to the ends of the earth. The Apostles, under the influence of the Holy Spirit and with His guidance, begin to act on the commission they have received from Jesus to spread the Good News.

Sometimes it's hard for us to grasp the importance of Jesus' Ascension. It's helpful if we use an analogy. Consider Jesus' Ascension to be a bridge. One end of the bridge is here on earth, where fallen human beings like us are struggling to find our way to the happiness and eternal life we were created for. The other end of the bridge is located in heaven, in the full presence of God, where that happiness and eternal life are fully experienced.

Now, Jesus built this bridge when He suffered for our sake on the Cross. He fixed one end of the bridge firmly here on earth where He established His Catholic Church and He fixed the other end of the bridge firmly in heaven by ascending to where He sits at His Father's right hand. Without Jesus' Ascension,

the bridge would have remained unfinished. In other words, Jesus is truly present in heaven, with His resurrected, glorified Body.

But Jesus is also still here present on earth in His Church that He established, and through the Sacraments of His Church, which are administered by His priests through the power of the Holy Spirit. We start on the bridge with the Sacrament of Baptism. The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist feeds us on our journey. Then we are anointed with the Sacrament of Confirmation to receive the seal of the Holy Spirit to guide us and lead us across the bridge.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation fixes the potholes of sins we make while we are crossing the bridge. The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick helps us and strengthens us if we are sick or suffering as we journey across the bridge on our way to heaven.

Furthermore, the bridge appears in the Mass since *“the Mass is Heaven on earth”* (St. John Paul II). This truth of our faith is symbolically proclaimed every time Mass is celebrated. When the priest proclaims the Word of God, he is representing God as God revealed Himself through His Word in the Old Testament. At the Offertory, the priest comes forward to receive the people’s offerings, just as Christ came from heaven, taking to Himself our human nature through His Incarnation.

Then the priest brings our gifts, gifts which represent our life, sufferings, and works, to the altar, where he offers them to God on our behalf, just as Christ took our human nature with Him when He ascended into heaven. Therefore, Our Lord’s unique priesthood is that He has extended the bridge of our salvation into heaven. He alone has done this, because He alone rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.

The Ascension assures us that Jesus does not leave us orphans because He has given us His Holy Spirit to lead us. In other words, the Ascension is not about Christ’s absence but about the new, spiritual presence of Christ to all of us, wherever we are, through the Holy Spirit. Now, the Risen Jesus is as close to each of us as the beating of our hearts.

The importance of the Holy Spirit can also be heard in the today's Second Reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians when he prays for them to be open to the wisdom and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit whose presence in our daily lives allows us to give a steadfast and constant witness to our faith in Jesus and the Gospel, and more importantly, to help us cross the bridge to heaven.

By virtue of our Baptism and Confirmation we have received the Holy Spirit and are called to do our part in helping our Church carry out her mission. It is our mission to give witness to the Risen Lord, to the Good News of our salvation, and to the need for repentance and faith in Jesus. In the same way as with the first Apostles, we are called to follow Christ and proclaim His message, by living in this passing world with our hearts set on reaching our eternal home in heaven.

The question for each of us today is to ask ourselves if our life is a true proclamation of the Gospel. The commission we have received from Christ is truly an awesome honour, but it is also a challenge that demands we carry out His mission. If we are following Christ, then we have to measure ourselves by how we have grown in living the Gospel. Are we living in a manner worthy of the call we have received? Are we building up the Body of Christ?

Before Jesus is taken up into heaven, He raises His hands and blesses His Apostles. At the Concluding Rite of the Mass, the priest, in the person of Christ, raises his hand to bless the people, and then in like manner also *sends forth* the people. This Concluding Rite sends us forth with God's blessing and the mission to carry the Good News of Christ to all people in the world. "As the Father sent me, so also am I sending you" (John 20:21).

Meanwhile, let us not stand around idle, for we have a mission to accomplish by helping others to also cross the bridge by teaching them about the Good News and being Jesus' witnesses in the world.