The Ascension of the Lord

May 12, 2013

I find the more I reflect on the Ascension, the more this feast has to say to the life and meaning of Christ Our Hope Parish. After all, it is our Parish Feast Day. When I was younger I thought of the Ascension as the risen Lord leaving this earth. The image from various paintings lingers: Jesus going up into the clouds, the apostles staring at the bottoms of his feet. I used to think he was probably happy to return to the Father, given how he had been treated at the end of his life. His job was finished and now he could sit at the Father’s right hand, as the creed says, until it is time for him to return to judge the living and the dead.

I used to have a great deal of sympathy for the disciples, and could understand their asking Jesus right before he leaves: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” I thought it might be similar to that moment in *Fiddler on the Roof*, when the villagers who have to leave their beloved home town, ask their rabbi, “Rabbi, wouldn’t this be a good time for the Messiah to come?” But he answers, “It certainly is, but it looks like we will have to wait someplace else.” The two men in white who suddenly are on the scene have a similar response: “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?” In other words: Time to move on. He’s gone. Other things to be done!

But it is not only that Jesus has left the apostles and us on our own to do what we can do. Remember, he sits at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us. Remember, he said that he had to go to the Father in order for the Spirit to come. The Ascension does not end the story of Jesus. Pentecost completes his work with the coming of the Holy Spirit. Not that that totally completes the story either. The story of salvation goes on until the end of time, for we are now his Body in the world. And the Ascension has relevance for us as Christ Our Hope Parish. The feast of the Ascension is about depth, not distance. We are called to be a beacon of light in downtown Seattle where all are welcome to grow in Faith, Hope and Love.

This feast gives us a clue as to how the Catholic Church both grows and continues to survive all these centuries. Despite the fractious communities that have always been part of the church, even from the very beginning – in places like Corinth, and Galatia, and even Jerusalem. Despite the violence its members have suffered, being beaten, beheaded, battered, sworn at, stoned, and swallowed by wild beasts. Despite the arrogance and exclusivity that has marked both leaders and members. Despite the sinfulness that remains in individuals and in communities, the church has survived and will continue to survive.

For Jesus declared to his disciples, “Behold I am sending the promise of my Father upon you.” We have a God who is not just a promise maker, but a promise keeper. The feast of the Ascension leaves us with what can be called the Ascension agenda. Item one: always live as a community who waits on the Holy Spirit. In Luke’s Gospel today Jesus tells his disciples to stay in the city “until you are clothed with power from on high.” This Spirit will come upon you and empower you to witness to Jesus. This Spirit will enlighten you and give you words to speak. And this Spirit comes as the spirit of peace and reconciliation. The work of the Spirit is to bring about the kingdom of God. So continue to wait on this Spirit, knowing I am interceding for you.

Item two: always witness to Jesus Christ in whatever way possible. Both the Reading from Acts and Luke’s Gospel tell the disciples they are to be witnesses. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,” Jesus says in Acts, reminding them of the extent of the work to be done. In the Gospel, Jesus tells them they are witnesses of these things: that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sin, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. Here we have the basic message: Christ’s saving death and resurrection to be shared with the whole world.

There is important work to be done. We are a diverse people of God whose faith inspires hope that shows itself in love. The agenda set out in our parish mission statement is an imposing one. Our goals give priority to full, active, and conscious public worship and personal faith development. We challenge ourselves to be a diverse and inclusive community formed in faith and justice. We urge parish concern for outreach through compassionate service and the new evangelization. We want to accomplish all this through responsible stewardship. This agenda is worth celebrating, to say nothing of our wholehearted commitment.

The last gesture the Scriptures record Jesus making as he was ascending into heaven was one of blessing. He raised his hands and he blessed them. It wasn’t a farewell wave but a raised hand calling for God’s protection on these disciples and all who would follow them. May we rejoice in the feast we celebrate today at Christ Our Hope, knowing we are not alone. Rather, we live in the Spirit of the One who was raised from the dead, ascended to the Father, and intercedes for us throughout the ages. Amen? Amen!

Paul A. Magnano

Pastor