**Homily for the Ascension of the Lord, Year A**

**May 24, 2020**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11 (The Ascension.)*

*Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 47 (God mounts his throne to shouts of joy.)*

*Second Reading: Ephesians 1:17-23 (God seated him at his right hand in the heavens.)*

*Gospel: Matthew 28:16-20 (Commissioning of the Apostles.)*

Every year, the Feast of the Ascension features a reading from the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles coupled with a gospel reading which records Jesus’ final words to his disciples, according to either Matthew, Mark or Luke. That’s two accounts of Jesus’ last day on earth. However, in both cases, the emphasis is not so much on Jesus as on *his disciples*, i.e., not so much on the one who departs as on *the ones who remain*.

The post-resurrection timeline that most of us assume to be correct is the one that Luke presents in his two-volume work, the *Gospel According to Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles*. In Luke’s rendering of the events, the Risen Jesus appears several times to his disciples over a period of forty days, mostly in and around Jerusalem. Then he gives a final exhortation and ascends into the heavens. Ten days later, on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples, as Jesus had promised. Then, empowered by the Holy Spirit, they go out and spread the Good News.

Well, the *Gospel According to Matthew* does not conform to that timeline at all. In fact, as Matthew tells the story, Jesus never appears to the Eleven in Jerusalem. He has just one brief post-resurrection encounter with the women outside the tomb, followed by the brief gathering with his disciples on a mountaintop in Galilee, which we hear about in today’s gospel. So, when Jesus meets his disciples in Galilee, it is the *first time* that they have seen him since his resurrection. That’s probably why Matthew says, “When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted.” This is like the scenes which the other three gospel writers place in the Upper Room in Jerusalem on Easter Day, where Jesus enters through a locked door and shows his wounds to his incredulous disciples to convince them that he is alive. On the mountaintop, Jesus greets his disciples, proclaims that “all power in heaven and earth” has been given to him, and instructs them to, “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.” Then, he makes them a solemn promise: “And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” *The end.*  Thus ends the Gospel According to Matthew.

This is clearly a commissioning ceremony. It is the moment when Jesus’ disciples cease to be just followers and truly become “apostles,” meaning, “those who are sent.” Matthew doesn’t tell us how they reacted to Jesus’ instructions or to his sudden departure, which Matthew doesn’t even bother to narrate. The Acts of the Apostles, on the other hand, describes the Ascension scene in much greater detail. And what we see in that account is a group of disciples who seem confused about what has just happened, and equally confused about what they are supposed to do next.

The disciples and everyone else who believed that Jesus was the Messiah anticipated that he had come to restore the Kingdom of Israel to its former glory under his father, King David. When Jesus died, it looked as though that dream had died with him. But, when he came back to life, his disciples probably thought that the debacle of Holy Week was just a temporary setback. With the last hurdle now overcome, Jesus could complete his work by establishing his glorious kingdom on earth. Of course, we know that they were mistaken. Holy Week was not an interruption in Jesus’ mission; *it was the mission*. Jesus came to conquer death, to establish an everlasting kingdom *not of this earth*, and to open the way to eternal life for all believers. He accomplished what he was sent to do. Now it was time for his disciples to proclaim that Good News to all the world. But, according to Acts, the disciples hesitate. Instead of going out immediately, they stand speechless, dumbfounded, staring up into the sky, perhaps wondering how Jesus is going to restore the kingdom to Israel now that he’s gone. They still do not realize that *his* work is done and *theirs* is just beginning.

The Ascension serves as both the conclusion to the story of Jesus and the beginning of the story of the Church. It marks the transition point when the mission of Jesus *becomes* the mission of the Church. That is why Jesus’ last words to his disciples, as recorded by Matthew, are so crucial: “*I am with you always, until the end of the age.*” Even though Jesus will no longer be *physically* present to his disciples as they go out on mission, he *will* accompany them wherever they go. Once ascended, Jesus could fulfill that promise for all of his disciples, even as they scattered to the four winds to proclaim the Good News to all creation.

With the Ascension, God’s covenant with his people entered a new phase, in which the Lord would make his presence felt, among all his people, in an entirely new way. Ironically, by departing from this earth, Jesus could be closer to his disciples than ever before, even as he empowered them to carry his message far beyond the limited area that he had been able to reach during his lifetime. The Apostles just needed to understand that *the message had now been entrusted to them*. From that point forward, Jesus would speak and act *through them*. They were no longer spectators or students, but evangelists and witnesses. And, so are we. The Lord speaks and acts through us now. *All of us* continue the saving mission of Jesus today, confident that he will be with us always, “until the end of the age.”