

Ascension of the Lord

Thomas Gumbleton | May. 28, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

Probably all of us are able to picture the ascension of Jesus as it's described by Luke in our first lesson today. It's something that we've heard from the time we were very young and we, I'm sure, have seen many pictures showing the disciples standing around in a circle looking up and Jesus kind of floating up in the air out of their sight. But that's not the way it happened, I have to tell you this. It's very important that we take some time to understand what the gospel writers are doing, what Luke is doing in the Acts of the Apostles, which is the history of the early church, but also in the gospel, and the other gospel writers -- they are not giving us historical facts.

Today's Readings
Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9
Ephesians 1:17-23
Mark 16:15-20
Full text of the readings

They are not trying to relate to us everything that happened in a chronological way with Jesus throughout his life, as we might write a history or a biography of someone. That's not what the gospels are. They're theological reflections. They're trying to understand and help us to understand who Jesus is, son of God, and very human, son of Mary. Even in Luke, if you look at the gospel that Luke wrote (and he's the author of both of these books?the Acts of the Apostles and the gospel), in the gospel, he has it all happening on Easter Sunday night.

There were 40 days during which time Jesus was kind of coming in and out of the disciples' lives. But what Luke is trying to do in the scene that he sets for us in the Acts of the Apostles is to help us to struggle with that extraordinary truth about Jesus, that he is fully human?fully human like us in every way?so he had doubts, he was afraid at times, he got angry at times, he felt the loss of friends, he grieved when someone died, he was like us, but he's also Son of God, and it took them a long time to begin to try to take that in.

We almost take it for granted, which means we're really missing the depth of the mystery of God becoming one of us. So on this first part of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke sets up the scene that recalls different parts of the Old Testament. Elijah, according to the stories about Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, was taken up into heaven. So now Luke is saying, 'Here is a new prophet. This is who Jesus is; he's the fulfillment of all the prophets of the Old Testament.'

Or the whole thing about the 40 days?the number 40 is very important in the scriptures. The chosen people, 40 years in the desert, as they were formed into God's people, so it's going to take us 40 days or longer to be formed into the community of disciples of Jesus. Forty days Jesus took preparing himself to carry out the work God had given to him. We're going to need a period of time to prepare ourselves and to continue to change ourselves so that we can carry on the work of Jesus.

See, all these different elements in the story as Luke puts it all together simply are ways of helping us to understand more deeply that Jesus is Son of God in glory.

In the passage from the letter of Paul to the people of Ephesus, Paul says, "He revealed His almighty power in Christ," that is, God revealed God's power in Christ, "when God raised him from the dead and had him sit at God's right hand in heaven, far above all rule, power, authority, dominion, or any other supernatural force that could be named, not only in this world, but in the world to come as well. Thus, as God put all things under the feet of Christ, set him above all things as head of the church, which is his body, he who fills all in all, unfolds his fullness in the church, in us."

So again, Paul is doing what Luke was doing? trying to help us to see that Jesus was like us in every way except sin, as Son of God in power; Son of God, who reigns over all creation, but also still one of us. That's the amazing thing about this mystery of the incarnation, that God, the God responsible for all of creation, bringing it into being, continuing to stand, that same God is Jesus, our brother, one like us.

That's why Luke, Mark and John, the gospel writers, the ones who speak about this ascension of Jesus, why they put it in their gospels, or in the letters of Paul, is to help us to have this deeper understanding about Jesus, to really try to grasp who he is so they draw from the Old Testament, they draw from their experience and they help us to realize that Jesus is Son of God in power. But there's another reason that St. Luke writes as he does in this scene from the Acts of the Apostles.

When Luke was writing the gospel and the book we call the Acts, it was already 15 years after Mark had written his gospel, 25 years after Paul's letters, so it's getting on some decades after Jesus had left. What was happening was that the community of disciples had begun to lose some of their original fervor. You'll find, even in the letters of Paul, where Paul was rebuking some of the early Christian communities because they stopped working. "Well, Jesus is coming back. He's going to return at any moment," even some people say, "Why get married? Jesus is coming back, it's all going to change," so they stop, in a sense, waiting for the coming of Jesus.

They are not doing what Jesus has told them: "You are to be my witnesses, to go out into the world, from Jerusalem throughout Judea to the ends of the earth. You are to be my witnesses." It wasn't happening. So Luke describes a scene whereby the disciples are gathered and Jesus says those very words to them: "You must be my witnesses." Luke is speaking to the church of his day and taking these words for the people of that time, a couple of generations after Jesus, remind them: You are to be the witnesses of Jesus. That means you must change your lives, follow his way. That's what's being said to us this evening as we celebrate this Eucharist, this event of Jesus being raised in glory with God.

Did you ever stop to ask yourself, "How well has this community of disciples carried out the mission of Jesus?" When I think about that, I think of John Paul II's reflection on what happened on Sept. 11 in 2001 in our country. He didn't write the reflection immediately, but he thought about it for a while and he wrote a reflection in which he asks a question: "In a world in which the power of evil seems once again to have taken the upper hand, how will that world be transformed into a world in which the noblest aspirations of the human heart will triumph, a world in which true peace will prevail?"

That's the kind of world Jesus proclaimed, the reign of God, where peace will prevail. Yet as John Paul describes it, we live in a world where evil seems to have the upper hand. "How do we restore the moral and social order subjected to such horrific violence?" He's speaking of the violence of 9/11. How do we do that? Why hasn't it happened? We have to listen to what Jesus has commanded us, "Be my witnesses, carry on my mission," and remember what the mission of Jesus was. He proclaimed it in his public life.

"The spirit of God is upon me. God sent me to proclaim good news to the poor, to give the blind new sight, set the downtrodden free, heal the brokenhearted, proclaim God's year of jubilee, the reign of God." Jesus said, "The spirit of God is upon me, and that's what God sent me to do, to make the reign of God happen." That's what

Jesus has sent his disciples to do and sends us to do. John Paul's question will be answered when all of us begin to take seriously that we are to be the witnesses of Jesus, do works of justice; work to end hunger in the world, end poverty in the world, in our country; guarantee that everybody has access to good healthcare, good education.

How many of us are really working to make those things happen, to make real justice break forth, to end violence -- domestic violence, the violence of abortion, the violence of the death penalty, the violence of war? What efforts are we making? Each of us has to ask that question, because what you heard in the gospel today, heard in the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus is saying to you right now, "You must be my witnesses. You must carry my message from Jerusalem to Judea, to the ends of the earth," and as more and more of us hear that message, give witness to it and make it happen, then John Paul's questions will be answered. The moral order will be restored and we can live in a world in which true peace will prevail. So I urge you today, leave from this church today, ready to be the witnesses of Jesus, to carry on his work, to make the reign of God happen.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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