

Ascension of the Lord, A – May 28, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
St. Paul’s Cathedral, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,100 words

Our Lord has made some rather heavy claims about himself in the gospels of the last several Sundays. A month ago, on Good Shepherd Sunday, he said, “I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved.” The Sunday after that, he said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” The Sunday after that – last week – he said, “whoever loves me will be loved by my Father”. In different ways he has been instructing us that he is the one savior of the human race. All who are saved are saved through Christ – “no one comes to the Father except through [him]”. And thus this Sunday, as we celebrate the mystery of his Ascension, he proclaims: “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.”

If Christ is the one savior of all – which is what he himself tells us – then this should shake us a bit. Think of how many in the world seemingly do not know or believe in him! Are such people damned? What if their ignorance of Christ is through no fault of their own? These are questions that arise for most of us at one time or another. But is this weighty matter really so cut and dry? And if so, might that not point to a cruel God, who allows all of this to happen? Some, down through the years, have said yes: it is that way. Those of you who have studied American Catholic history might remember reading about a priest from the Boston area named Father Feeney. He held to a very rigorous interpretation of the traditional teaching that “outside the Church there is no salvation”,¹ and he was excommunicated for it. Eventually he was reconciled to the Church after he took a more nuanced position.² For the Church’s teaching on this matter is nuanced – the Church, as Pope Paul VI taught, is an “expert in humanity”,³ and so is able to take into account the great differences within the human family and reconcile them with the truth that God has implanted in the human heart and also proclaimed to us through divine revelation.

We begin from what Christ himself has told us plainly in sacred scripture: he is the one savior of all. Anyone who is saved is saved by the Lord Jesus; there is no other way. There is no getting into heaven through a side entrance or a back door. Christ is the gate! But from this point, the teaching becomes more subtle. For there are some who never come to know about Christ or his Church. And our God is not a cruel God. No, he is at once a God of truth and justice and a God of mercy and love. Truth can be quite edgy and justice can be quite cold; but the Lord communicates his truth in love and tempers his justice with mercy. In Christ Jesus, God becomes one of us and shares in our condition. Christ’s goal in becoming man was to make it possible for all to be saved – not to draw a line that made it easier for many to be condemned.

The Catechism teaches on this very topic. Quoting the Second Vatican Council, it says, “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation.”⁴ This teaching, for me, brings comfort: there is hope for those who never come to know Christ. But it also still leaves me uneasy: it would be better if they did know him; it would

¹ Often referred to in Latin: “extra Ecclesiam nulla salus”.

² Historians may disagree on what Fr. Feeney actually taught and if there were not also some “messy” ecclesiastical politics involved in the whole affair; I comment on the matter here in passing from the standpoint of popular historical perspectives.

³ Pope Paul VI, Address to the United Nations, 4 October 1965.

⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 847, quoting Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 16.

be better if all knew him; and I – we – might bear some responsibility for that! Thus, the words of our Lord in today’s gospel, as he ascends into heaven: “Go... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... [and] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” He has ascended and he is drawing us all upward to himself. But he involves us in that process. He sends us as his agents, to bring his gospel to all.⁵ And he promises to be with us always in this task, until the end of the world.

On this Ascension Sunday, then, let us pray for all who are involved in the Church’s missionary activity. We often think of that activity as only taking place abroad, but in fact, there are many local initiatives as well. I think, for example, of the excellent St. Paul Street Evangelization group that bears witness to the Catholic faith here on the streets of Birmingham. I think of the work the Consolata and Guadalupan Sisters have done and are doing in our poor neighborhoods. Further afield, there are the Appalachian Home Missions and there are also other groups working in our big cities. And of course, there are the foreign missions as well. The entire world is the Church’s mission field:⁶ everywhere, there are people who do not know Christ and his Church – or there are those who once did, but have drifted away and need to come back.

This missionary mandate, however, is not just for those who have accepted a particular vocation to work in the missions. As Bishop Baker continually reminds us, especially when he celebrates the sacrament of Confirmation, all of us have a missionary mandate from the fact of our Baptism. We, too, have a role to play in leading others to Christ and bringing them into that upward movement towards heaven. This common missionary mandate is sealed in us through Confirmation, which gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we might have strength to bear witness to Christ in the world. You, as lay people, can bring Christ to places where priests and religious cannot – and that starts with the day-to-day of your homes and your families. It extends to your friends and co-workers, as well as the strangers you meet in the course of God’s daily providence for us all. Our prayer for those involved in the Church’s missionary activity is thus a prayer for ourselves, also. Jesus proclaims: “I am the gate”; “I am the...way”; “whoever loves me will be loved by my Father”; “go, make disciples of all”.

⁵ Indeed, in the next paragraphs of the Catechism it speaks about the Church’s missionary mandate.

⁶ See Catechism no. 848, quoting Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, no. 7: “the Church still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize all men”.