

The Ascension of the Lord, A – May 24, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 5pm Vigil, 7:15, 8:30, & 11am Sunday Masses – 950 words

We tend to think of Pentecost as the feast that has to do with the Church’s mission in this world. And it is true that the Holy Spirit came on that day – which we observe next Sunday – thus giving clarity, courage, and impetus to the apostles to launch out on that mission. But it was really on Ascension Day that our Lord clearly expressed and handed on the mission: “Go, therefore,” he said, “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” – as we heard in the gospel. Or, as in the first reading, from Acts, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”.

The gospel relates an important detail leading up to Christ’s Great Commission: it says that “they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted”. No, it was not only poor Thomas who had doubts; they all did at one time or another! But so have we. What’s more, our doubts concerning God have been more or less wide-ranging. I am sure that many of us have wondered from time to time simply whether it was all true. But then we may have also doubted about our role in this great drama that we call history: “How could he use me?” Many young men, in fact, who sense a possible call, experience this particular doubt: “With all my sins? With all my limitations? With the fact that I am weak and could really mess everything up?”

Moreover, perhaps during our time of pandemic lockdown, some of our doubts have intensified. The devil likes us to be isolated, and he often takes advantage of that; for that reason, when we find ourselves in such a position we must be careful and vigilant. Man was not meant to be alone.¹ We can all too easily get “stuck in our heads”, starting to see the reality we are distanced from in a distorted way. And we can start to feel more distant from God, as well. Yes, doubt is very real for us, also, whether in possibility or in actual fact. But, like the disciples, even as we doubt, we see the Lord around us in so many ways, and we worship. Some use doubt as a pretext for going away from God; let us not fall into that trap.

As I see it, our solution to the reality of doubt is three-fold. The first part, so emphasized by our Lord throughout the gospels, is that of seeking greater humility. That involves the humble recognition that yes, left to ourselves, we are insufficient and incapable. Without God, we will mess things up – royally even. And we have, in fact, done so to one degree or another until now – though his mercy saves us. But this humility extends also to the acknowledgment that we simply cannot know or understand everything in this life. In this regard, doubt is normal, for our minds can only grasp so much – and then we so often forget the things we once grasped. Doubt should not trouble us so much if we recall how limited and feeble we are.

But this leads to the second part of the solution, and that is the humble pursuit of a resolution. Our minds are indeed finite and fickle, but that cannot become an excuse to throw up our hands and be content in ignorance. No, we should seek to go deeper, and we can do so in various ways. There is, of course, the need to continue studying our faith, which we do first and foremost through reading the scriptures and Church teachings (such as the catechism). But we can also read and listen to other great authors and commentators. The wealth of information we have at our disposal nowadays, in our technological age, is simply breathtaking compared with what our ancestors had. Ask yourself: Is the study of my faith a regular part of my life?

Lest we commit the error of thinking the resolution of our doubts falls entirely to us and our resources, the third part of the solution must also be kept in mind; and that is what the first reading called “the promise of the Father” – the Holy Spirit, who comes to us, also, and will lead us into all truth. Doubt can arise from isolation or at least isolated thinking, but its full resolution

¹ See Genesis 2:18.

necessarily involves being brought into relation with God. In other words: doubt is an invitation to prayer – more prayer, humble prayer, deeper prayer, better prayer. Recall that the Ascension happened on a Thursday; then, over nine days (the first novena) leading up to Pentecost, the apostles were together in prayer with the Blessed Mother awaiting the Holy Spirit.²

And the Spirit did come and liberate them from their doubts and fears. So what are we struggling with at present? Let us be humble, seek the answers we can find, and otherwise prayerfully commend those doubts to our Lord. The traditional prayer to the Holy Spirit is a fitting way to conclude – and for us to prepare for Pentecost: “Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth. Let us pray. O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant us in the same Spirit to be truly wise and ever to rejoice in his consolation. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

² See Acts 1:13-14.