

Ascension of the Lord – Homily by Fr. Dan Donovan (May 20, 2012)

Religious language, including the language of the Bible, is often **symbolic and metaphorical**.

This is particularly the case when it speaks of God and of the heavenly world and of God's relationship to us and of ours to him. So it is with some of the language in today's readings. The passage from Acts describes how **Jesus was lifted up** and how a cloud took him from the sight of the apostles. The psalm invites us to clap our hands and sing praises, for God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with a trumpet blast. In today's second reading, Paul imagines Christ raised by God from the dead and seated at his right hand in the heavenly places.

The **resurrection of Jesus**, his **ascension into heaven** and the outpouring of the Spirit at **Pentecost** are all parts of a **single saving event**. His resurrection was not so much a return to this life as a break-through to a new and definitive life, to life fulfilled, to life in God. The ascension marks the end of one mode of Jesus' presence to us, a physical mode, and the beginning of another, a **presence in the Spirit**.

Luke's account of the ascension underlines that the return of the Son to the Father in no sense entails the leaving behind of his humanity. Jesus did not come to save souls but to **save human beings**; his goal was not to redeem us from of the world but to **redeem the world**. This, probably more than anything else, helps to account for what is most distinctive about Christianity.

I turn **seventy-five** this weekend. Whatever time is left for me to live, whether short or long, I am embarked on the last part of my life and activity.

The tendency of many in our culture is to deny death or to fight against it or even to become bitter as it approaches. I know people who have been positive and productive for decades but who, as old age comes upon them, become sour and cynical about their life and about life in general.

Christianity affirms the goodness and the value of our life and of the life of the world and does so even as it recognizes our brokenness and sinfulness, our pain and suffering, our failures and

self-destructiveness. The world and everything in it come from God and in some way will return to him. As humans we are made in God's image and likeness; we are made to be in relation with him.

All these truths are reaffirmed and deepened by our faith in Jesus as the Word or Son of God in human form. He was fully human, like us in all things but sin. In entering into our world and embracing to the degree that he did our life, he gave to both an added dignity and value. His whole purpose in coming was to overcome those things in us that put us at odds with God and ourselves and that undermine our efforts to become the kind of creatures we were made to be.

In his suffering, death and descent among the dead, Jesus plumbs the depths of physical and spiritual suffering to which we are exposed; in his resurrection he reveals that they are not the final word about us; they will one day be swallowed up by life renewed.

The **ascension of Jesus** affirms that our destiny and the destiny of the world is not destruction and dissolution but transformation and fulfillment. Where he has gone, we are destined to follow. His fulfillment is a promise of ours.

In a famous passage in his letter to the Philippians, **Paul sums up the whole mystery of Christ** in a few simple phrases. Although Christ was in the form of God, Paul says, "he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave Being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and given him the name above every other name so that every tongue might confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."

The lifting up of Jesus, his exaltation, his being seated at the right hand of the Father, not only reveal our destiny; they assure us that Jesus, as the risen Christ, continues to live and to be for us a source of healing and strength, of peace and joy.

The first part of today's reading from the letter to the Ephesians is in the form of a prayer. Paul asks God to give us a **spirit of wisdom** so that, with the eyes of our heart enlightened, we may come to

know the hope to which we are called, that we may come to know “the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.”

The more profoundly we enter into and make our own the wisdom of which Paul speaks, the more will we understand the **beauty and preciousness of our life** in the eyes of God and the nature of the fulfillment to which we are called. Whether we are young or middle-aged or old, our life is and **remains a gift**, a gift that has been entrusted to us for a certain period of time. Let us not waste what we have received but develop and use it in as positive and creative a way as we can. More important than what we are able to achieve is **the way in which we achieve** it. In returning to God the only thing that we will be able to bring with us is ourselves and what, in the course of our life, we have become.