

The Acts of the Apostles from which today's first reading is taken is the second of a two-volume work, the first volume of which is the Gospel of Luke. In the opening verse of today's reading, Luke refers back to his Gospel, in which, he says, "I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning," that is, from the beginning of his public ministry.

The closing verses of Luke's Gospel offer a first reference to the ascension. Luke tells how, as Jesus was giving the apostles a final blessing, he was taken up into heaven, thus bringing to an end that brief period during which the risen Jesus appeared to various individuals and groups among his disciples.

The ascension underlines the fact that the time of the physical, tangible, visible presence of Jesus in the world has ended. As he leaves his disciples, he promises to send them the gift of his Spirit.

The message contained in the last verse of today's reading reorients the thinking of the apostles from the past to the future. "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven," the two men in white declare to the disciples, "will come in the same way you saw him go into heaven."

The joy and enthusiasm provoked by the experience of the risen Jesus and the gift of his Spirit led many believers in the first decades of Christian history to

hope that Jesus would soon return and bring about the definitive triumph of the Kingdom of God. They saw the period opened up by the resurrection and ascension of Jesus as a between time, a time between the first and second comings of Jesus, the time of the church. That time has turned out to be a great deal longer than they expected.

For anyone who knows even a little about the history of the church knows that its history has not always been an easy one. Individual believers as well as the institutional church have been attacked in different ways by a variety of forces. These have included attacks on persons and church buildings as well as more subtle forms of an ideological nature. Attacks like these continue to happen in many countries today and are in fact more common than ever before.

In addition to such external pressures and challenges, the church has also had to deal with internal ones. Some of these have to do with the spiritual and moral failings of priests, bishops and others, while others are the result of conflicts and tensions, charges and counter-charges, suspicions and name-calling. Such things weaken the church and rob many believers of the joy and peace that should mark a Christian life.

The reading we heard a few moments ago from Paul's letter to the Ephesians offers a vision of what the church ideally should be. The emphasis is on unity. "There is one body and one Spirit," Paul declares, "just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all." The text goes on to speak of the fact that this unity in no sense implies uniformity. To "each of us," the apostle adds, "was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift."

My life as a celibate priest involved for more than 50 years in teaching has obviously been very different from the lives of most of you. What is important for all of us is that we develop the gifts we have been given and put them at the service of our family, our communities, the church and the world.

Earlier in the reading from Ephesians, Paul offers a general pattern of Christian life no matter what the context in which it is lived out. He mentions humility, gentleness, and patience, and encourages us to bear "with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

In our efforts to lead a life deserving of the title Christian, we have an inexhaustible resource in what I would describe as the twofold presence of Jesus

to us. He is present through memory, memory that has found written form in the Gospels, memory that is kept alive through the great feasts of the liturgical year, memory that is at the heart of the eucharist.

Because memory has to do with the past, it needs something to bring it alive and to make it effective in the present. The Bible, the liturgy, preaching and teaching all have their contribution to make to this process. The most important factor, however, is the Spirit, alive and active in our hearts.

St. Paul once wrote, “no one can say Jesus is Lord,” that is, no one can come to a genuine faith in Jesus, “except by the Holy Spirit.” Elsewhere he declared that the letter, even the letter of Scripture, by itself kills, while the Spirit gives life. It is the Spirit of God and of Christ who alone can bring the word of Scripture, liturgical celebrations, and the example of saints alive in such a way that they are able to touch and transform us. It is for this reason that our celebration of Easter and of the Easter Season comes to a climax next Sunday with the feast of Pentecost, the feast of the Spirit, sometimes called the birthday of the church.