

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, May 9th 2013

In archdioceses and dioceses of the US states of Alaska, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington or in parts of the world where the celebration of Ascension is transferred to the Seventh Sunday of Easter, the Daily Reflection and readings may be found here:

Thursday in the Sixth Week of Easter

Weekly Guide for Daily Prayer

Student Daily Reflection

The Catholic faith is perhaps the earthiest of all the religions on our planet. Not only is it bedecked with tangible symbols – bread, water, song, oil, images, incense – it takes time seriously as well. For example, although we don't know exactly when Jesus was born, we celebrate his birthday on December 25. Naturally, given the nine months of human pregnancy, we place the Annunciation exactly 9-point-zero-zero months earlier. Anything shorter might have been embarrassing; anything longer might have been an undue burden for his mother. 9.00 months. Very concrete, very earthy.

Today is the Feast of the Ascension. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in their Gospels, all tell us that after the Resurrection and various appearances, Jesus was taken up into the heavens. No hint of when. But if we had no other information, it could have been as early as Easter evening. John's Gospel concludes with a post-resurrection appearance in Galilee, and Paul cites a tradition of several appearances. But more concretely, the Acts of the Apostles mentions that these appearances occurred over a period of 40 days – which is why the Church has chosen to celebrate the Ascension when we do, exactly 40 days after Easter.

Although interesting, it's a mistake to focus on the chronology, as I have just done, or to wonder about Jesus' whereabouts during those post-resurrection days. Jesus' glorified body wasn't constrained by the usual limits of time and space. Today's Feast is not about when something happened (Jesus left the earth), but what it is that happened. Psalm 47 points us in the right direction: "God mounts His throne to shouts of joy". Today is a celebration not of where Jesus is, but of what he is – King of the world – of the cosmos. And Psalm 93, which the Church uses for the scripture response during Eastertide, makes the point yet again. "The Lord reigns. He is clothed in majesty."

Taking that insight as a key to understanding, suddenly the many references in the Gospels to preaching the Kingdom come into focus. “. . . He sent them out to proclaim the Kingdom of God . . .” (Luke 9:2). The Lord’s Prayer is specifically asking God to establish his Kingdom – his rule – on earth, now! Pilate asked Jesus whether he was a king. “King” was the charge on the cross at the crucifixion. Just before his being taken up, Jesus tells his disciples: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me . . .” (Matt 28:18). The Ascension is about Jesus assuming the authority he has won in his death and resurrection.

Christians have generally underplayed this aspect of Jesus’ victory. As believers, we know that God created everything; God sustains everything in existence. So, of course he is King – always was, always will be. But the fact remains that humans have a propensity to sin. We call that tendency “original sin”. Every human except two has it (Mary’s being freed from it is what we have meant by her “immaculate” conception). What Jesus did in his death and resurrection was to call into being a new creation, a creation freed from slavery to sin. In the first creation God breathed on the clay out of which he had fashioned Adam, who thereby became a living being (Gen 2:7). In this second creation, Jesus likewise breathed on his disciples on that first Easter evening (John 20:22), thereby forming them into a new humanity. The Greek word used for “breathed” occurs in just those two places in the entire Bible. That can’t be an accident. Clearly John was intending to remind us of the creation story when he tells us that Jesus “breathed” on his disciples.

Our old selves die in Baptism. We emerge from the font with Christ’s Spirit enlivening and enabling us. With and through that Spirit we are empowered to do good, instead of evil. Formerly in slavery to sin, we are now enslaved to Christ, whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light. Jesus, mounting his throne, “reigns, clothed in majesty” (Ps 93) – our only Lord.

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