

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, May 12th 2013

The Ascension of the Lord

PRE-PRAYERING

On the afternoon of the Third Sunday of Easter, I had the privilege of joining two sets of parents in baptizing their three babies, two were twins. As a concluding gesture, there is the blessing of the ears and mouths. One of the little persons took my blessing finger and jammed it into her mouth and sucked mightily and when I used the finger of my other hand to extricate my one finger, she grabbed the second with great expectational intensity. She was hungry for what I could not give her. She had, perhaps, a first lesson in delayed gratification.

We so long for completion. There we all were in the entrance of this beautiful church still learning about the gift of longing, desiring, hoping and of course faith. There we were, all who have had our tryings to find in this or that, in him or her or them, what they cannot give us, how they cannot nourish us. Those three little persons were being initiated into the human family of promise. We have all tried to suck life's fullness from the always temporary. The church they were entering promises to faithfully present God's invitations to keep entering, keep receiving life's little hints at what fullness will be.

As we re-enter the church, blessings ourselves again with the waters reminding us of our baptisms, we can pray with the longings for completion we experience and the experiences of the almost, and the abiding promise of God to be with us which we will celebrate again next Sunday at Pentecost.

REFLECTION

The big question you may have upon listening to the First Reading of this liturgy is why did the officials want to stone Stephen. I suggest you read the end of Chapter Six and then the first fifty-four verses of the chapter from which our Reading is taken. Well I know you probably won't so I will tell you briefly. Stephen, as with most martyrs, in a narrow sense, got what they deserved. I know you won't like my writing this, but read verse fifty-one of this chapter. Stephen is provoking the religious leaders, as did Jesus. Stephen called them stubborn with pagan hearts. He's not painting with a delicate brush here. He has, for fifty verses, reviewed for them, O.T. 101, the whole history of God's relating with the people of Israel. He relates how religious leaders have treated the Prophets and done away with them. Stephen tells them that God does not live in a house or temple. He confronts them by telling them that though the Law was brought to them by angels, they do not obey the Law.

Pow! That was enough for the religious elders and officials. Our few verses relate Stephen's vision, prayer and in quite similar words to Jesus, though innocent, gets what he deserves as punishment for his insulting provocations and reward for his fidelity and faith.

The Gospel for today has some key images. The big idea that Jesus, in John's account, is that the always-mysterious God has actually "sent" Jesus into this world. Jesus is a "This God loves the world, the Apostles, as much as that God loves Jesus". This God has given Jesus as a gift, and has given the Apostles as a gift to Jesus. These Apostles are to see themselves as in Jesus and so as a gift to the world.

There is much about union, God in Jesus and Jesus in the Apostles. There are lots of words all right which take slow reading and intense listening to take in. We are meant to hear Jesus' words as addressed to each one of us and the Church and each community as who we are, yup, the "New Evangelists." This Gospel, really the whole of chapters thirteen through seventeen, are addressed to and about us. Chapter thirteen opens with Jesus' washing feet and telling us to do the same. The remainder of these chapters intensifies the same themes, Jesus does for us what we are instructed to do as revelations of his love. We do, because we are. We are in him and by his choice, he is in us and through us, presenting God's glory in this world and in our days.

If and when we do this enough, we too will receive what we deserve. Doing what is right is often insulting. The world did not all believe that Jesus was sent by God to recreate the world. The religious leaders did not want to believe that Stephen was revealing God's truth to them. Our trying to continue Jesus' recovery of God's Kingdom has not met with popular acclaim throughout history and especially in our modern times. Perhaps we have to redefine what success really is. I would say it is fidelity to who we are as being in Christ and doing what is in us to do without evaluating, measuring and demanding self-validation.

Larry Gillick, S.J.