

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Jun 1st 2014

The Ascension of the Lord

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. When they entered the city they went to the upper room where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers (Acts 1:12-14).

This Sunday's first reading, printed above, is the perfect choice to help us get into the spirit of this moment of the liturgical year, between the Assumption and Pentecost. Here Luke describes the core of Jesus' disciples gathered together shortly after the Lord's departure. They will soon become the heart of the first church, the Christian community of Jerusalem. The list of twelve names, including Mary (and minus Judas Iskariot), plus "some women" (including surely those Luke had mentioned among the women who discovered the empty tomb--Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James) plus Jesus' brothers (the four named in Mark 6 and Matthew 13) add up to a group of around twenty. These twenty are at the center of a total number of "brothers" mentioned in the net verse as 120. The eleven apostles had been instructed by their risen Lord to stay in Jerusalem and wait for "the promise of the Father," and told that they would be "baptized by the Holy Spirit." Jesus promised further, "you will receive power then the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

How each the "inner twenty" mentioned in the list would be feeling in that prayer group is well worth contemplating. For example, Peter, drenched in the mercy of the Lord's forgiveness for his denial and recalling the Lord's prayer for him at the Last Supper, is about to re-emerge as the leader, chastened and maybe afraid; James and John, maybe still embarrassed by their silly and arrogant request to be seated at Jesus' right and left when he comes into his kingdom; Simon the Zealot perhaps still dealing with the gap between his earlier expectation of a warrior Messiah and the nonviolent Messiah he has now come to know. And Mary, who had surely been the one to teach Jesus how to pray, is now praying in the light of the fuller revelation of the child she and Joseph had raised. This kind of contemplation can help us prepare ourselves for the gift of Pentecost with prayers like the following:

Jesus, we too realize that, like those 120 in the upper room, we are still on a journey of discovering who you are as our risen Lord. We recall your teaching that the greatest gift we can ask of the Father is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Like your sheepish, astounded, forgiven, expectant disciples, we know that there is still more to discover about our relationship with you. Illuminate our understanding of ourselves and you. Strengthen all of us to step into the mission you have given us. Help us become the joyful, steady, healing, merciful, loving, persevering disciples that you have called us to be in our baptism into your body.

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