

Bishop's Reflection – Ascension

If we come to the Lord with blinders on, is it any surprise we cannot see? If we cannot see beyond what we expect or like to see happen, is it any wonder we continue to question the Lord?

Listen to the disciples' words in today's First Reading. Even after their experience of the Risen Christ and the many things he has taught them, they ask him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Notice how little they have changed. What they expected to happen as part of Jesus' earthly ministry prior to his Passion and Death, continues to be at the forefront of their expectations as he ascends into heaven. In essence, they remain stuck with the same agenda and expectations. They are looking for an earthly kingdom.

Imagine the disappointment in Jesus, as his mission among them draws to a close. They have still so much to learn, so much to understand, so much to see. There is still so much left undone and incomplete. But Jesus words to them are not born out of frustration, correction or rebuke. Instead he replies, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." He gently turns their thoughts into another direction, redirects their gaze on what God is doing. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Like the disciples, we need to hear the same gentle words, to turn our attention from the kingdom we are hoping to see (our own agendas and expectations) to the work of the Holy Spirit among us. How often has the Church not gotten caught up in a type of "kingdom building", focused on earthly glory, rather than the Lord's Divine Commission? How often are decisions made based on some form of "self-preservation" and protection of the institution rather than from the basis of what is being asked of us?

What so often begins as a "witnessing to him" gets lost in the maintenance of buildings and institutional structures. What started as a commission to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" has gotten caught up with "maintenance" of present models of ministry and roles of people. Good intentions aside, many of the Church's outstanding issues are the result of the same kingdom mentality expressed by the disciples in our First Reading.

Even in our own personal lives, have not many of our own pursuits and expectations proven sterile or unfruitful because we were "looking for" or "striving for" our personal establishment of a "kingdom", or a restoration of some past reality? We can all think of times we were not as open to the power of the Holy Spirit, nor as keen about our role as "witnesses" to the world, as God had intended us to be. So often, too, we are left "gazing up towards heaven", where Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, wondering when he will finally set things right.

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?” The men in white address us, too. “This Jesus, who has been taken up to heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Or, in other words, the Lord who sends you for mission, to “make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you”, is also the one who equips you for that same mission (“You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” and “and remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age”). Let us, therefore, stop looking for what “is not to be” and heed the Lord’s call to mission and rely on the gift of his Spirit.