

Bishop's Reflection – Ascension (Year B)

Our lives consist of two great periods of formation: a time of apprenticeship, symbolized by family life, and a time when we begin to take on roles of leadership, as we are sent into the world. When Luke writes his Gospel, he recounts the events that make up the years of apprenticeship, a time when the disciples are taught and instructed at Jesus' feet. When Luke writes his second great work, The Acts of the Apostles, he recounts the second great period in the life of the disciples, a time when, guided by Jesus' teaching and instructions, they are filled with the Holy Spirit to fully participate in the Christ's Mission to the world.

It is important to note that we never stop being in formation. The things we learn later in our development are no less numerous or important than the things we learn early on. Educational theorists tell us that skills are learned bit by bit and that the full extent of learning can only be completed when the student is given the chance to become the teacher and the materials that are learned at one stage are applied in the next. In this way we are mentored from childhood into adolescence and from adolescence into adulthood, each step building on the other. As disciples of Christ, we travel a similar journey. Drawing from what we have received, the ongoing gift of the Holy Spirit and the lived experience of those who walk the road with us, we are called to put our faith into action.

No matter the case, however, Jesus' Ascension into heaven marks a turning point in the life of his disciples. It is likened to us leaving the safe shelter of our family's home, or the hallowed halls of whatever Institution of Learning we last attended, into the future that lies beyond. All of a sudden, there is a sense of "now what?" Leaving us looking for both answers and direction.

This experience may repeat itself at several different times of our lives, especially as our level of responsibility changes or increases, leaving us feeling somewhat disoriented and navigating uncharted waters. We see how the disciples look heavenward, not quite knowing what to do or how to do it. They are told, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." In short, they are told to trust and to believe that they do not stand abandoned and alone, but must draw on all that Christ has entrusted to them, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the support of one another to carry on the Church's mission in the world.

A promise is given, "You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now", a promise that is essential for the mission. For how can we carry out God's work without God's help and support? For throughout the Church's history, God has accompanied it with signs and wonders. Some to validate the good work that is done, others to show God's faithfulness and mercy despite our weaknesses and sins. The signs spoken of by Jesus at the end of Mark's Gospel are but a small sample of the signs he performed in the early Church; from the casting out of demons and the speaking in tongues to St. Paul's encounter with a venomous snake, each one of us, too, can attest to God's divine providence in our lives.

What then are we to make of all this? Only this, that we step out with confidence, and continuously draw strength and wisdom from the one who sends us. Having been formed in the ways of God, and being open to the ongoing gift of the Holy Spirit, let us not be overcome by fear and doubt, but trust in the one who is seated at the right hand of the Father, interceding for all of his people.