

**Feast of the Ascension  
(June 2, 2011)**

**Exaltation!**

A few years ago, writing in *America* magazine, Fr. John Donohue had this to say about the Feast of the Ascension:

“In one of the annual preached retreats I was subjected to as a young Jesuit, the director presented a vivid picture of the Ascension (long before the age of shuttle launchings). As Jesus rose heavenward, we were told, he saw Jerusalem, Nazareth, Galilee, Asia Minor, Greece, and finally Rome.” And Fr. Donohue laconically remarks, “This is precisely what the feast is not about.”

A very dear Jesuit friend of mine, Fr. George Krieger, who passed away some years ago and whom some of you may have known, startled the congregation on the Feast of the Ascension by beginning his homily this way: My dear friends, the Feast of the Ascension is about the exaltation of Jesus Christ at the right hand of the Father. It doesn't make any difference whether he got there on a cloud or on a motorcycle. Fr. Krieger in his own inimitable way was making the same point as Fr. Donohue.

The second reading from the Letter to the Ephesians really gives us the key to the meaning of the Feast. The author says: It is like the strength God showed in raising Christ from the dead and seating him at his right hand in heaven, high above every principality, power, virtue, and domination, and every name that can be given in this age or the age to come. He has put all things under Christ's feet and has made him, thus exalted, head of the Church which is his body: the fullness of him who fills the universe in all its parts.

Well in that very theological statement not only is Jesus exalted but so is the language. To get some idea of what it might mean to us today we have to (if you will pardon the expression) bring it all back down to earth.

Luke has a unique way of looking at the leave-taking of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit. The other Evangelists look at it differently, especially John for whom the Resurrection and the coming of the Spirit happen together. But Luke's separation of the two allows us to look at Jesus in a

very distinct and detached way.

His was a life that ran its course in thirty-odd years. He met a violent end but, as faith makes clear, he was vindicated and made the Lord of History by the God he called Father. It was the life of a Palestinian Jew that changed the course of history. To us today that sounds like a contradiction, a Palestinian Jew, and yet, Jesus embodied in himself everything that it meant to be a Palestinian and everything it meant to be a Jew. His teaching is admired by believer and non-believer alike. His life of limitless love and non-violence has influenced some of the world's most important figures. And with all the divisions his followers have experienced through the centuries – and there have been many, even, perhaps, especially in our own time – in spite of those divisions they are united in one thing. They all bear the name Christian. And they all profess belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior, a profession made possible only with the help of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promises to send that Spirit on his disciples, and the Spirit's main role will be to shed light on the meaning of Jesus the Christ and how that meaning affects our lives.

The Ascension brings the mission of Jesus to a close. It gives us a bit of respite, a chance to look back and reflect before moving ahead. I often think of those days between the Ascension and Pentecost as a retreat for the Apostles and all those gathered in the upper room awaiting the coming of the Spirit. Isn't it true that after the death of someone we loved and admired, we ourselves are renewed by reviewing his or her life. So too the disciples in prayer had their time of silent reflection. But Jesus, true to form, moves our attention forward as well. We are not to spend excessive time gazing heavenward. He will not leave us orphans. And so he reminds us, as we reflect on his life and teaching, to prepare ourselves for the next exciting phase of God's interaction with the world. Pentecost is on the horizon.

The Ascension is a leave-taking and presents us with a paradox, one of those seeming contradictions that we meet in our Christian faith (virgin birth, God-Man, if we want to save our lives we must lose them, we must die in order to live, etc.). On the one hand Jesus is absent, but on the other he is present. He is absent in the way the disciples and his friends experienced him in his life here on earth, but he is present in so many other

ways. He is present in the word we read in scripture, he is present in our Eucharistic celebrations in the form of bread and wine. He is present in his spirit that he sent to abide with us and fill us with his love and enlighten us about the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection. St. Ignatius believed that God is present everywhere. So if God is present everywhere so is Jesus. That's why he told us to find God in all things. And of course Jesus is present in each one of us individually and all of us together because together we make up his body. And so both as individuals and as a community we make Jesus present. What a glorious task. It was the disciples' task and it is ours as well. No wonder the angel said, "Why stand you here idle gazing up into the heavens?" To this Jesus adds another task as we heard in Matthew's Gospel. Go out and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing, evangelizing, telling them the Good News. This, too, is our task, to take what we learn here, what we become here, and share it with the world around us, fully confident in the promise he has made us, "I am with you always until the end of time." I am with you, no matter what else is going on. In your sorrows and your joys, I am with you. In your sufferings, in your failures and in your successes, I am with you. Share my love with everyone around you. This is Jesus' promise to us all. In the power of the Spirit, we can do it. We are not alone. We are not alone.