

## **Ascension (May 29, 2014)**

How would you all like to be in heaven with Jesus? Oh, I know we all want to be in heaven after we die. But I'm not talking about after we die. I mean, right here and now. Now I know that that probably sounds silly to you and without some further explanation I guess it is silly. So let me try to make some sense of it.

It all has to do with the meaning of the Feast we celebrate today, the Ascension of the Lord. Actually the Feast has a number of meanings, one of which is not that Jesus went floating up into the heavens. If we let ourselves get bogged down in Luke's imagery we will miss the meaning altogether. A very dear Jesuit friend of mine once startled the congregation on this Feast by saying, "The Feast of the Ascension is about the glorification of Jesus Christ at the right hand of the Father. It doesn't matter whether he got there on a pink cloud or on a motorcycle." That was his inimitable way of saying what I just said, "Don't get trapped by the imagery."

Now the Jesus who is with the Father in Heaven is the same Jesus that walked the earth: the Son of God who is both human and divine. So it is not only his divinity that is in heaven, it is his humanity as well. And his humanity is the same as ours. Our humanity therefore is in heaven in company with the Father, the Spirit, Mary, Joseph, and all the angels and saints! And it is in this way that we, in some mysterious, spiritual way, in some sort of mystical participation, we too are in heaven. Now this is not fanciful. It is not simply the product of my twisted imagination. St. Augustine said exactly this in a sermon on the Feast of the Ascension. Here are Augustine's words: "For just as he remained with us after his ascension, so we too are already in heaven with him, even though what is promised us has not yet been fulfilled in our bodies." And St. Augustine usually knows what he is talking about! So it is theological fact. It is an awesome theological fact.

And yet in spite of this theological fact that we are in some mysterious way in heaven with Jesus, we know, too, that Jesus is no longer with us in the way that he was before the Resurrection and the Ascension. But it does

not mean that Jesus is absent. He is still very much present. As St. Augustine said in that quotation I cited, Jesus actually remained with us. If we simply look at our Eucharistic celebration we can see at least three ways in which Jesus is present. He is present in the Word that is spoken to us from the Gospel. He is present in the sacrament in the form of bread and wine. And very important, but we perhaps do not consider it sufficiently, he is present in the congregation, first of all in each one of us individually, but in a special way, in all of us together, all of us who are this community, this small part of the Body of Christ.

Yes, indeed. Christ, who ascended to heaven in his body, carries on what he began on earth through his new body, the community of believers, that is to say, through us. He continues to teach through its apostles and evangelists. He continues to minister through its prophets and pastors. In and through his Body, the Church, Jesus continues to heal and to comfort, to forgive and to include. To paraphrase a statement by St. Theresa of Avila: *Now ours* are the only hands that Jesus has with which to touch and heal. *Now ours* is the only voice that Jesus has to speak consoling words, to comfort, to forgive, and to reconcile. Indeed in this mysterious, marvelous way we have his power, the same power with which he performed miracles when he walked the earth. We have not been left alone, we have the Spirit that he promised. We have his very presence in the Eucharist. We have one another. Together we make up the new Body of Christ. Together we work and pray, we worship and we love.

Luke tells us in his story of the Ascension that after Jesus had passed out of sight, an angel appeared and said to the apostles, "Why do you stand here idle gazing up into the heavens?" It's as if he is saying, "There is work to be done. Keep your ideals, your ambitions, your sights as high as the heavens, but keep your feet planted firmly on the ground. No time for idle gazing. Time rather for the important work of the Kingdom." The angel might well be saying the same to us, to us who have found that part of us is already in heaven with the Lord, but at the same time we are the Body of Christ right here and now in this world. What an awesome mystery!