

Homily Ascension May 13

As some of you may know my previous assignment as pastor was establishment of a new parish in Vancouver, Washington and eventually building a church. I learned how uninformed and naïve people were about the process. The first thing one does is to visit and minister in the existing parishes from which the new parish will be established. On my first Sunday visit to the largest existing parish where I was introduced as the pastor of the new parish that would be forming, someone came up to me and asked: "Oh, is that the new church I see being built out on 136th?" I had to quickly inform the questioner that, "No, there was no church yet, first the people had to gather as a parish in rented space and then in time we would raise money to build a church." Somehow, since a priest had been sent to start a parish, it was thought there would be buildings from opening day. The milestone of building a church would only to be realized in time with much hard work. Things are not always as soon or simple as we might like.

There was a similar confusion in the earliest years of the Church. Faith in Jesus Christ was faith in His resurrection. It was also Faith that Jesus had gone to prepare a heavenly home and would one day return to take those who believe in Him to that heavenly home. Some thought, since it was proclaimed, it was to happen very soon. And the expectation of Jesus' immediate return caused some to neglect the work that needed to be done by believers in Jesus Christ.

Consequently, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the scripture writers carefully included all the things that happened or were said that made it clear there was work to be done between Jesus' resurrection and ascension and the fulfillment of the promise of heaven for believers.

Both the Gospel and the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles describe the Ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven. They spoke of Jesus' ascending, leaving the apostles, and returning to His rightful place enthroned in glory in heaven. Both passages also spoke directly about the mission of the apostles. It was the mission to go out and preach the Gospel after receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. They were to preach about Jesus so that other people could come to believe in Him and His redemption and His resurrection and their own promise of resurrection. The preaching in order that others can come to faith was critical. Mark simply and bluntly quotes Jesus as saying:

"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned."

In our second reading St. Paul, in his greeting at the beginning of his letter to the Ephesians presents a very upbeat proclamation of faith in Jesus who has ascended into glory, and who, because He has ascended into glory grants us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation and knowledge so that we can be enlightened and know the hope that belongs to us. We are part of that chain: Jesus resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven, the release of the Holy Spirit for spiritual rebirth, a heavenly vision and the ability to live in a hope that keeps drawing us forward toward our own heavenly goal.

So we celebrate the ascension by reminding ourselves that we are called to live with that abiding goal and vision of our heavenly destiny. It is a vision and reality that is kept alive only by continuing to live in faith in Jesus Christ and acting faithful to all He has revealed as true.

At the same time, our heavenly vision keeps us scanning from right to left looking for those that Jesus would want to have us gather, those whom Jesus wants us to help to give them the opportunity to believe and be baptized and remain faithful. And sometimes our work at drawing others to Christ is the powerful but subtle example of peace, confidence and joy that should show through our own daily challenges because our heavenly homing device is at work. It is peace, confidence and joy that should disposes us to acts of charity toward those around us as well.

The building of a parish church, a permanent place of worship, is somewhat of a metaphor of the Christian life. In Vancouver, the people gathered for nearly nine years as a parish community in a rented strip mall space, keeping before them the vision and goal of a suitable place of worship. Throughout the journey people were busy simply being, doing and growing in all the day to day work of a parish community. The metaphor then breaks down. Reaching the goal of building a Church is not the same as reaching our heavenly destiny. It however, does serve as a powerful tool on the journey of the members of a Church. It serves to maintain and sustain our vision of our own heavenly ascension. Here in our worship at Mass we do enjoy a glimpse and foretaste of heaven as in our prayer we join with the Holy Trinity, the veil between heaven and earth is lifted and we sing and pray alongside all the angels and saints. And we are fed, in word and sacrament, so that the

heavenly vision can more effectively remain with us throughout our week. It can nourish our charity that gives credibility to the Gospel and the promises of the ascended redeemer Jesus Christ. And we can more effectively invite others to join us.