

Today, the Seventh Sunday of Easter, is the Sunday after the Ascension. It is in the midst of one of those waiting periods we find so uncomfortable in life and liturgy. It is after the Ascension, so that the Risen Lord is no longer to be found walking and talking and eating among his friends. But it is not yet Pentecost so that the faithful do not feel themselves empowered to go out and do his work themselves.

It is a time of waiting and thinking and wondering. It could be a very depressing time, a discouraging time, focusing on the absence of the Lord and feeling helpless and abandoned, but this has never been the emphasis of the Ascension liturgy. In fact it has often included the lines of the Angels at the Ascension addressed to the congregation: "Why do you stand there looking up into the sky?"

It is telling, I think, that in the fourth century the Jerusalem church community, who followed so faithfully the steps of Jesus on the Via Dolorosa each Good Friday, did not celebrate the Ascension in the great basilica built by Saint Helena on Mount Olivet, the mount of the Ascension, but rather they celebrated in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

The Ascension closes the circle, completes the process of the Incarnation. Just as in the Nativity divinity came to dwell in human form, to share our life with all its pain and struggle, so in the Ascension humanity is made one with divinity in all its glory. It is not that Jesus went away and left us alone, but rather that he took our very humanness into the heart of God. He opened for us the possibility of being one with the Love and Creativity at the heart of the Universe. Saint John Chrysostom expressed this idea beautifully in one of his homilies for this feast: "Through the mystery of the Ascension we, who seemed unworthy of God's earth, are taken up into Heaven. . . . Our very nature, against which Cherubim guarded the gates of Paradise, is enthroned today high above all Cherubim."

This is a fabulous mystery to contemplate and renders the Ascension a particularly wonderful feast.

I have heard people lament its placement at the requisite forty days from the Resurrection, on a Thursday, in the midst of the work week so that few people pause to come to worship, or observe it in any way, and so miss the opportunity to revel in its wonder and importance for our lives.

But I think that its placement is in fact fortuitous. If our humanity has been taken into the heart of God, then it is our whole humanity, not only our most pious and virtuous, ‘Sunday-come-to-meeting’ selves, but also our working selves, struggling to balance the conflicting demands on our time and attention.

It is in the midst of the ordinariness of life that this mystery can shed remarkable light, rendering all activity capable of participation in the loving creation of God. If we can but accustom ourselves to this idea: that what we are has been taken into God, that divinity can infuse our entire life, then our minds and our hearts and our activities can be transformed into occasions of divine action in the world. We can become agents of revelation to one another. Pumping gas or selling shoes or washing dishes can become filled with the divine presence for us and for those around us.

It is appropriate that this be a waiting period, to give us time to realize the wonder of possibility here before we plunge into the noise and excitement and challenge of Pentecost. But waiting is a worrying thing, an uncomfortable thing.

In the late Middle Ages, Ascension Day was marked in much of Europe by various dramatizations, pageants which sought to express the realities of the feast in visual form. The central event was generally the hoisting up of a statue of the victorious, risen Christ through the Holy Ghost hole in the church ceiling as the scripture was read and the gathered faithful watched. (This was accomplished by someone up in the attic pulling on a rope attached to a ring in the statue’s head.) The platform on which the statue stood would be draped with cloths and flowers to help it represent Mount Olivet. Acolytes were sometimes dressed as angels, and various priests and deacons as the Blessed Virgin and the apostles. Silk hangings were suspended from the hole to represent clouds.

It could be very lovely, but the formal extinguishing of the Paschal candle and the creaking of the rope as the statue slowly swayed upwards could have seemed melancholy, engendering sadness and loneliness instead of wonder. This is natural because the glory of all this, the great triumphal integration of humanity into the heart of the Trinity, occurs beyond our senses and beyond the scope of the pageant to represent. All one could see was the going away, the ending of the earthly, tangible ministry of Jesus the Christ.

This explains the addition of a foretaste of Pentecost to the celebration. In some places, as the Risen Lord disappeared from view into the ceiling hole, roses and lilies and other flowers showered forth along with bread in the shape of the Host.

Thus was the congregation reminded that the Ascension was a necessary precursor to the showering forth of the gifts of the Spirit upon the faithful, the gifts that would surely come, with unique appropriateness to the life of each individual and to the building up of the Body of the Church. They were also reminded of the continuing presence of the Lord always and everywhere in the Eucharist, for spiritual healing and growth and strength.

These promises and reminders in physical symbolic form gave people hope and comfort, which is what everyone needs in order to wait patiently.

The Ascension acknowledges that I should not expect Jesus to stop by for a bite to eat at the next Sinners' Dinner, that I must look for Christ in the ordinary people around me, not least because they too are human, partaking of that same humanity which has now been embraced in the heart of God, that same humanity which may one day be divine. It reminds us that we have direct access to the God who loved us enough to endure human birth and life and death, and whose love has transformed all of them.

There is no Holy Ghost hole in this ceiling through which to pull up a statue of Jesus or from which to drop down flowers and bread today, or water and lighted wicks next week. We lack those physical reminders of the gifts of the Spirit which are ours because of the mystery of God in Christ. But we still need reminders, because we still need to wait – and waiting is very hard. We are frequently called upon to wait, wait in expectation, wait in hope.

This can be very difficult for us, mortal, impatient humans. We tend to want what we want when we want it. If the Lord leaves promising to send the Spirit, then the Spirit should come right away, not after ten days.

But that is not the way of things. It took ten days, and Jesus' friends had no idea how long it would be, or even just what it would be like for them to have the Spirit come.

So it might be helpful for us to see how they waited. It is described very explicitly in Acts: they gathered and were 'constantly devoting themselves to prayer.' They did not withdraw into private worry. They did not mope or fret and fuss. They 'devoted themselves to prayer.' It is not merely that they prayed, as any good Jews did and do, three times every day, but that they devoted themselves to it. They put energy and concentration into the work of

prayer, into adoration of the God who loved them and whose mysterious will would somehow some time be revealed, into opening themselves to the subtle and powerful working of God in their hearts and minds.

That is indeed the best way to wait.

The most important thing we can all be doing is ‘devoting ourselves to prayer’ and so opening ourselves to the action of God’s spirit in our hearts and lives.

While it is true that we do not have anyone tossing reminders of divine promises to us from the ceiling, we do have other reminders. Most of all our celebration each week can remind us that we can always find the Lord in the Eucharist, that the Holy Spirit grants us not only life, but a multitude of gifts with which to move ahead on our journeys, and that we can wait for what we need.

If we wait patiently and quietly, prayerfully, we may catch glimpses of the heart of God opening to receive us, inviting us into the divine life of boundless Love. Amen.