

INAUGURATING CHRIST'S NEW PRESENCE AND THE CHURCH'S MISSION

(A Reflection for the Solemnity of the Ascension, 13.05.21, by Fr Galadima Bitrus, OSA)

The Solemn Feast of the Ascension of Christ into Heaven commemorates the end of Jesus' physical presence and his 40 days post-resurrection appearances. It also prepares us for his new presence in the Holy Spirit, even as we receive the mission to continue to bear witness to the Good News of God's kingdom.

In the 1st Reading (Acts 1:1-11), Luke writes to a certain Theophilus, a name which means "lover of God". He recalls his first book (i.e., the Gospel), where he provided an orderly account of the life and teachings of Christ up to the ascension, after Jesus had promised the gift of the Holy Spirit for the courage to witness to the Gospel throughout Israel, and indeed, to the ends of the earth. We are told that Jesus was taken out of the sight of the disciples by the cloud.

Now, the cloud is a symbol of God's presence. In Exod 24:15-18, Moses ascends the mountain and the cloud covers it, and from the cloud, the Lord calls Moses and Moses goes into the cloud, where he remains with the Lord for 40 days and 40 nights. Also, in Exod 13:21-22, the Lord leads his people with a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the way, and with a pillar of fire by night, to give them light (see also Dan 7:13).

We also read in the account of the ascension that two men dressed in white suddenly stood and said, "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" (v.11). These are words of consolation and reassurance that Jesus is not disappearing into thin air but that his going is a conscious part of the chain of salvific events, hence, he will also return in like manner.

Similar figures appear at the empty tomb when it was thought that Jesus had been taken away. In Luke 24:4, two men in dazzling clothes stood beside the perplexed women, and they asked: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Then they reminded the women in a reassuring way, all the things that Jesus had said concerning his passion, death and resurrection after three days. Thus, they dispelled the fear that he might have been stolen and they confirmed that he has indeed risen according to the divine plan of salvation. In John 20:12, these two men are identified as angels who saw Mary weeping at the empty tomb and asked, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

Therefore, the cloud and the two men in white at the ascension, assure us of God's unfailing presence, always on point to inquire about our troubles and confusion, and to console and reassure God's children that the course of God's plan about us can never be derailed. Indeed, even our moments of trouble and confusion might just be a chapter in the unfolding account of our salvation history, as long as we remain "Theophiloi", that is, persons in love with God.

In the 2nd Reading (Eph 4:1-13), St. Paul takes us through the dynamics of the multiplicity of ministries and diversity of gifts vis-à-vis their unity of origin and purpose in the life of the Church. We are reminded of the necessity of walking with all lowliness and meekness, with patience and mutual forbearance, eager to maintain unity of spirit in the bond of peace, as we live out our various callings; otherwise, our diversity of callings, instead of being a source of riches, can result into a source of chaos, disorder and therefore, lack of peace and unity.

The Gospel Reading (Mk 16:15-20) comes from the last part of the Gospel of Mark. Scholars tend to consider it, however, an additional conclusion, considering as the original ending, the visit to the tomb by the three women and the instruction that they tell the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee in Mark 16:1-8.

This conclusion to the Gospel presents Jesus' apparitions to Mary Magdalene (16:9-11) and to two disciples on their way to a village (16:12-13), both of which were not believed by the rest of the disciples, until a third instance when Jesus appears to the eleven disciples (16:14-20), rebuking them for their unbelief and stubbornness of heart, and then commissions them to go into the entire world to proclaim the Gospel.

After the great commission and assurances of salvation and accompaniment of believers with signs and wonders, Jesus was lifted up to heaven where he sat at the right hand of God while the disciples went about proclaiming the Good News, accompanied by signs that confirmed that the Lord was indeed working with them.

In the Gospel, just as in the 1st Reading, the Lord's Ascension leaves us with the assurance of his continuous presence in the life of the Christian community. In our sicknesses and pains, his presence will be there to bring about healing and comfort. With this assurance, we can go on to live out our mission as one body, though many members; one origin and purpose, though many ministries and gifts, as Saint Paul exhorts us in the 2nd Reading.