

Ascension

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations...teach them to carry out all I have commanded you, and know that I am with you always until the end of the world.”

Matthew 28, 16-20



Notice that the gospel chosen for today has nothing to say about Jesus' departure and ascension into heaven. I suspect that's because Matthew wanted his readers to focus on the import of Jesus' final message to his disciples which took the form of a commission and a promise. It is interesting to note that the very first chapter of Matthew's Gospel concludes with the announcement of the pending birth of Jesus:

“ ‘The virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel,’ a name which means **God is with us.**” (Matthew 1, 23)

At the conclusion of his Gospel, Matthew has Jesus reassuring his disciples with a similar message: *“And know that **I am with you** always until the end of the world.”* (Matthew 28, 20)

Jesus not only commissions his disciples to go out to the world and live and work as he did, but he assures them that the relationship he has with them will endure and will sustain them in all they undertake. Moreover, the fact that he leaves them is a vote of great confidence in their capacity to hear and respond to his Spirit planted deep within their hearts. They may have had their ups and downs in getting through the previous three years but Jesus now pays them the ultimate compliment by trusting them with his mission to the world, confident that they now have what it takes to respond with generosity and courage to the promptings of his Spirit. And as successors to them through baptism, we are given the same vote of confidence, the same mission and the same assurance.

Some years ago, I came across the following very simple human-interest story which echoes something of the message of the Ascension:

Caroline had tears in her eyes. “Are you sure you really want to move so far away from us?”

Her favourite Aunt Ingrid smiled. “You know, Perth is not all that far away from Sydney. Besides, you’ll be starting high school within a few weeks. You’ll make so many new friends that you won’t have time for me, anyway.”

Caroline couldn’t remember exactly how long ago it was that her aunt had moved in to live with the family. However, she knew that it was because of her aunt’s patience and guidance that she had grown from being a sullen and spoilt only child into a vibrant teenager with lots of interests.

“But what am I going to do without you?” Caroline cried.

"You'll be just fine. But in case you do get bored, I've left a package for you on your bed," Ingrid said as she gave Caroline a last goodbye hug before getting into the taxi that was waiting to take her to the airport.

When Caroline went back to her room, she opened the package Ingrid had left her. It contained a pair of knitting needles that had been used by several generations of women in the family; a fountain pen that had belonged to Ingrid's late husband, a journalist of note; and a photo of Caroline and Ingrid sitting at the piano after Caroline's first lesson. A note on the back of the photo read: *Precious moments last forever.*

As she thought about the gifts she had received, Caroline began to understand that, even though she felt empty because of Ingrid's departure, she was connected through those gifts to generations of her family which she had not even met. As she thought about all that, she picked up the fountain pen and started to write a thank-you letter to Ingrid.

Matthew's account of the Ascension is not the marking of a departure. As we have seen, it does not even mention one. It is, rather, the celebration of a presence - the presence of God's Spirit in and among the disciples and all of us who have succeeded them. Remember, Matthew's Gospel begins with the promise of *Emmanuel, God with us*; it concludes with the promise of the Risen Christ: *I am with you always, even to the end of the world.* Jesus returned to the Father, but remains present to us in the Spirit of his love, his hope, his compassion. Prompted by that same Spirit, we can discover Christ's presence in all the events of our lives, in all the challenges we encounter, in all the people with whom we engage.

If you care to look at the monuments and statues that have been strategically placed in the city where you live, you won't come across any that have been dedicated to the memory of pessimists. Jesus' parting message to his disciples and to us is one of boundless faith, hope and optimism. That it has been realized is evident in the people of God who keep on keeping on, despite the evils of persecution and prejudice that have buffeted them from without and the scandals, corruption and injustice that some of them have, at times, created from within.

The message of today's gospel reading is that God's Spirit is still among us and within each of us, inviting us to be witnesses to what Jesus entrusted to us, to go out to our world and to make a difference as we set about joining together to make God's reign a reality.