

+ J. M. J.

If you think about it, today's celebration of the Ascension of the Lord is rather important. It is a holy day of obligation. We have one mystery of the rosary dedicated to this event. Our view of the events of this day probably correspond to one of the two accounts we have in scripture, Jesus being lifted up and disappearing in a cloud or his regal blessing of the disciples as he is taken up. I suspect there is a danger for us to be caught up in the scene as the apostles did and fail to understand the significance of what Jesus did.

The Ascension is part of the Paschal mystery. In the original plan Genesis tells us **"God created man in his image, in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them"** (Gen. 1:27). God did this because he wanted us to share in his love. You could say that we were made to love God. For us loving God means that everything we do our every thought and action is done for God. We know the story. Adam and Eve turn away. Once sin enters the world the harmony of love and we as one people can no longer completely give God the single focused love that we were created to give. We need a savior.

How can we repent and give something to God when everything we have already belongs to God? This reconciliation occurs in the person of Jesus. He takes on our flesh so that in his very person he is true God and true man. He brings our human nature in unity with the divine nature. Through the events that we celebrated at the Easter triduum he offers himself as a gift to God the Father.

On this day Jesus takes what he has done, human nature reconciled with the divine nature in his person and brings it into heaven. Because we have made one with Jesus in baptism, because we consume the body of Christ and become what we eat in the Eucharist, not only are the gates of heaven open because our very brother is there now, but we share in the joy of Jesus and all the saints there present as well as the graces of heaven right here right now. Consider this as I pray in a bit over the bread and wine, **"May his gifts help us rise with him to the joys of heaven."**

Do we want to be in heaven? Consider that Jesus preached over and over the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Why? Jesus is the kingdom of heaven. Pope Benedict XVI reminds us Heaven is a person: "Jesus himself is what we call 'heaven.'" As we contemplate heaven we should think of two things. First of all we must follow Jesus in that we will die and rise, but if we die we must leave all the things of this world behind. Are we attached to what is here and do not want to leave? Secondly that reconciliation that only Jesus could effect means that in order for us to share in the rewards that he won we have to be transformed by the sacraments into Jesus. Heaven begins for us here and now.

There is a list in St. Paul's Letter to the Romans which helps us understand heaven. He speaks of love. St. Paul says be sincere. **"Hate what is evil, hold on to what is good... anticipate one another in showing honor. Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord... persevere in prayer... contribute to the needs of [others]. Bless those who persecute (you), bless and do not curse them"** (Rom. 12:9-14). When we do these things the joy of the kingdom of heaven begins here and now in our lives; furthermore we are pleasing in the Lord's sight and well prepared for the place of peace that he has gone to prepare for us. If we do not we need to be changed; we can't bring malice into heaven. I think many people believe heaven will be exactly like earth but without suffering. I dare say that's an oxymoron.

Today we consider our brother, Jesus Christ who is in heaven. His Ascension is an invitation to us to think about where he and prayerfully examine are we ready to be there. My friends this invitation is difficult, but for sure we are not left alone. We have a powerful Advocate that changes us from within, and we will talk about this Advocate when we gather here again next week to break bread.