

Ascension Sunday 2021

A Reflection by Fr Sylvester O'Flynn OFM Cap., Rochestown, Cork

The Ascension of the Lord

Some of the doors that have kept people locked in have been opened in recent days. But there is still a long wait until all doors will be opened. Religion has a huge role to play in sustaining hope by remembering the bigger picture of life.

We are celebrating the Ascension of the Lord to heaven. Saint Luke tells us that it was forty days after the Resurrection. In the bible, forty usually refers to a time of preparation. The Risen Lord appeared in various ways to the disciples to help them in the transition from knowing him in human flesh to knowing him as the unseen God through faith. "Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe." After Jesus it would truly be a New Age ... a new mission, a new power and a new hope.

A New Mission

On the Mount of the Ascension the apostles were told not to be looking up to the skies but to look out to the world as a field of mission. "Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations. And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time". That mission and promise extends to our time. God is not just up there, but God is with us and in us. As Pope Francis put it, each one of us not only has a mission but each one is a mission to bring God's love and compassion to others. "I have no hands now but yours."

A New Power

Jesus promised, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you." Next week we will celebrate Pentecost. See how the power of the Spirit changed the apostles ... from ignorance to belief, from fear to courage, from despondency to joy.

A New Hope

The Ascension opens up the doors of heaven for us. This is beautifully expressed in the Preface for the Feast. "He ascended, not to distance himself from our lowly state but that we, his members, might be confident of following him where he, our Head and Founder, has gone."

The renowned scientist, Stephen Hawkins, described human life as "chemical scum on an average-sized planet, orbiting around a very average-sized star, in the outer suburb of one of a million galaxies." Chemical scum! No, thank you! Give me our beautiful, meaningful and hope-filled Christian religion any day. Planets and galaxies suggest a big story. But religion offers a story even bigger.

A Winter of the spirit

The restrictions on normal life since the outbreak of the Covid pandemic have been severe. People lost their jobs, their business, forms of entertainment, recreation, freedom to travel and so on. Truly it has been a winter of the spirit. But winter is not altogether a bad season. Winter gave the garden a rest period just as sleep restores our energy. A frosty night at the right time transforms fallen leaves and other matter into enriching compost. Winter is a great time for hacking away briars and unwanted roots. During the lockdown, creative

people found new ways of shopping and communicating, new ways of raising funds and taking exercise. In many instances, things will never be the same again.

Maybe this new way of thinking will be of benefit to the Church in refreshing its mission.

Pope Francis wrote that certain rules or precepts which were very effective in their time no longer help to shape people's lives. Certain customs which reflected a bygone society no longer serve as a means of communicating the Gospel.

The age profile of those who come to Mass is startling. Very few candidates are entering seminaries or religious life. The younger generation have lost the impact of religious vocabulary. They have not strayed away from their faith but from the faith of their parents or grandparents. It surely is a winter season in the Church, but when winter comes can spring be far behind? History shows that the lowest times produced the greatest saints and transformers. Springtime in the Church will offer a fresh way of revitalizing the living proclamation of the gospel.

Trust in the Holy Spirit

At the time of his Ascension, when Jesus told the apostles, "you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but to the ends of the earth", they must have felt totally flummoxed. They were told to gather together in prayer to prepare for the coming of the Holy Spirit. And the rest as we say is history.

The Ascension is dated on the fortieth day and Pentecost, a harvest festival, is the fiftieth. The nine days in between must be the original novena. For all of us it must be a week of intense prayer inviting the Holy Spirit to come and renew the heart of the Church and thereby renew the face of the earth.

Prayer

With Saint Paul we pray. "May God enlighten the eyes of our minds so that we can see what hope his call holds for us, what rich graces he has promised the saints will inherit, and how infinitely great is the power that he has exercised for us believers."