

The Ascension of the Lord “Heaven and Earth Collide”

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These past couple months have been difficult as we endure “sheltering in place”. However, a joke among priests these days is that by February we are going to be neck deep in baptisms. You just wait, I think they will be called the Corona Babies. No joke and around 2033, we will probably call them the Quaran-Teens. Get it? Sorry for that; however, personally I think we will still be wondering how to explain to these kids how a bat in China led to a shortage in toilet paper. We are going to get through this folks. We are going to get through it. Happier days are coming.

For me personally, one of the hardest parts about these past couple months has been the deprivation of being able to go to my favorite spots to enjoy the outdoors. A couple weeks ago the State Parks opened up for day use, and that has been a consolation. However, the social distancing when we are out there will take some getting used to. For me, spending a day outdoors has a way of clearing the mind, especially if that day takes you up into the mountains. There is something about being in the beauty of God’s creation. There is something about the quiet of the outdoors, being away from technology, away from civilization, where we can truly feel heaven and earth come together. I mention this because the Gospel reading begins with the Apostles meeting the Risen Jesus, not only outside, but also on a mountain, a place where heaven and earth touch. It is here that the Ascension of the Lord occurs, not in a town, or a temple or rooftop. It is outdoors on a mountain where Jesus ascends into heaven both body and spirit. Of course, in the bible, when something happens on a mountain we are meant to take notice. Something important is being pointed out to us. In this instance, it is here where Jesus ascended both body and spirit into heaven. What does this mean?

My friends, the Ascension of the Lord, like Christmas and Easter are all feast days that celebrate the goodness of the human body. On Christmas, we celebrate God himself becoming man in the birth of Jesus Christ. On Easter Sunday, Jesus rose from the dead with a resurrected body. The tomb was empty, you see. In the Ascension of the Lord, Jesus is elevated from the earth with his human body. This means our fleshy human nature is capable of entering into heaven itself. This is why, in my mind, the Ascension of the Lord happens on a mountain, a place where heaven and earth touch each other, overlap each other and becomes one reality. Our human nature and God’s divine nature has done the same thing. And, an important implication of this is, heaven and earth doesn’t really have to be forever separate anymore. Because of the incarnation and paschal mystery, they can become one.

You see, this is what Jesus’ mission was. His first words in the Gospel, and his theme throughout his ministry, is the revelation that the Kingdom of God can be here, right now, on Earth. Even in the Lord’s Prayer we see this message when he invites us to pray, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Do you see it? The mission isn’t to keep heaven and earth separate, the invitation is to welcome heaven here on earth.

We see it in our first reading from Acts of the Apostles. Who are these men in white robes? They are messengers from heaven here on the earth. Heaven and earth have been connected you see. What is their message? Their message is, “Why are you standing there looking at the sky?” As if, heaven is somehow meant to be a separate place from the earth. This message is much clearer in our Gospel reading. Prior to ascending, Jesus says, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

My friends, the central insight of Christianity is that God has visited his people in the person of Jesus Christ. Heaven and earth has collided in the incarnation. Jesus has welcomed our human nature into the very life of God. Our baptism into Christ makes us citizens of heaven, right now, this moment, and not something to wait for after the moment of our earthly death. By our configuration to Christ in the sacrament of baptism, heaven and earth collide, and becomes one in our person, in our lives, in our relationships and in our experience.

You know who understands this concept the best? I am thinking about artists who capture a glimpse of heaven in their masterpieces, architects who design churches to be houses of God, and parents who look at their new born baby and see a miracle. What impresses me most about Mother Teresa is that she didn't need a hiking trail to experience heaven on earth. She could see heaven on earth in the slums of Calcutta. She could see Jesus in the faces of the poor and the dying. She could see heaven on earth in even the worst places humanity has to offer. Even there, Mother Teresa could see heaven and earth collide. I want that gift too, don't you?

My friends, think of all the anxieties we have in our life right now. These times are not easy. It is very convenient to think of our daily lives as something separate and distinct from heaven as if heaven is far, far away. The feast day of the Ascension of the Lord, and everything else about the Gospel, challenges us to consider heaven isn't that far away. As disciples of Jesus, our mandate is to do everything that we can to move, elevate our little piece of creation around us so to become one with the Kingdom of Heaven.

I sincerely think this is why Jesus taught us to pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”. The question becomes: Do we want this? Do we want it? What is that one thing we can do this week to help make this prayer a reality in our daily lives? What is that one thing we can do this week to welcome heaven on earth? You see, the Ascension of the Lord tells us that heaven and earth have collided in the person of Jesus. This means heaven and earth has collided in us through the waters of baptism. Next week, we will celebrate the feast of Pentecost. And so, in anticipation, it seems right to pray, “Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.”