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20 May 2007

The Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord (C)

Today, "God mounts his throne amid shouts of joy" (Psalm 47:6). The Lord Jesus Christ "was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight" (Acts 1:9). Can you see the Lord ascending in glory? Can you hear the song of the angels echoing that sung at his birth: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14)?

He ascends into heaven, accompanied by the eyes of the disciples gazing after him. He lets them observe it, and he makes them witnesses... They certainly saw, touched and felt him. They confirmed their faith by looking at him and touching him. They accompanied him with their gaze as he ascended into heaven. With attentive ears, they heard the angel's voice assuring them and foretelling that Christ would come again.¹

The same Christ who will come again is the same Christ who will come to be our judge. Do we believe this? It boils down to a matter of faith: do we trust in the power of the Risen Lord or not? Do we truly believe that he is the only Son of God? Do we truly believe in the power of his love?

These questions easily bring to mind other questions: What happens to those who believe after death? Is a life of obedient faith worth it in the end, or is it too complicated and too difficult to follow faithfully after Christ? These are

¹ Saint Augustine, Sermon 256D.6

questions for each of us to consider, for they are indeed the questions of our hearts; it has always been this way.

In every age, man's questioning has focused not only on his ultimate origin; almost more than the obscurity of his beginnings, what preoccupies him is the hiddenness of the future that awaits him. Man wants to tear aside the curtain; he wants to know what is going to happen, so that he can avoid perdition and set out toward salvation.²

With the eyes of faith we come to see what will become of us in the end, for "this Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Through his death Christ has torn away the veil and has opened for us the way to heaven. Today's celebration is not so much about the Lord's ascension into heaven as it is about his Second Coming when he will take those who are faithful to himself. This is a comforting thought, if we live a life of faithful obedience to Christ.

Let us not fool ourselves. The simple living of a "good life" is not enough to attain salvation; faith is required. The Savior plainly tells us,

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name?" Then I will declare to them solemnly, "I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers" (Matthew 7:21-23).

² Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*. Adrian J. Walker, trans. (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 1.

When surely do not want to hear the Lord Jesus say these words to us. Rather, we want to hear him say to us, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34).

After summarizing his mission, the Lord Jesus leads the disciples to Bethany where there he ascends to the right hand of the Father. Why does he take them to Bethany, situated on the side of the Mount of Olives? The name Bethany means "House of Obedience." Jesus takes the disciples to the Mount of the Olives - on which is the Garden of Gethsemene - to show them that just as Jesus was obedient to the will of the Father, the disciples, too, should be obedient to him. If we are obedient to him then we will follow him, and following him we will come to share eternal life with him and with all the saints.

Even so, it is not always easy to believe. The teachings and commands of Jesus are difficult and hard to keep; they challenge us to grow and to love and oftentimes it seems far easier to stay where we are and not to love as we know we should. Following after Jesus Christ always involves pain, a pain that paradoxically leads always to joy, for

The Lord did not only shed his blood, but he also applied his death to the preparation of the cure. He rose again to present us with a sample of resurrection. He suffered with patience all his own to teach us the patience we should

have. In his resurrection, he showed us the reward of patience.³

Let us then enter into Bethany, into the House of Obedience on the mountain the Lord; let us enter into the life of the Church where the Lord Jesus continues to speak to his disciples today. Let us listen to the Church, for to her have the means of salvation - the Scriptures and the Sacraments - been entrusted.

What does it mean to be obedient? It means to listen, to listen so well to another that we come to know their wishes for us before being told. To be obedient to Christ is to be his disciple, to be his student, to be his friend who dwells with him and lives in the light of his love. Christ Jesus gives to us the Holy Spirit in Baptism and in Confirmation so that we might, as Saint Paul says, "know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of his glory in his inheritance among the holy ones, and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe" (Ephesians 1:18-19).

Whoever wishes to follow after Christ and go where he has gone "must deny himself and take up his cross daily... For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it," says the Lord (Luke 9:23-24). The Cross is not to be feared but is to be embraced; it will not harm us but will save us!

³ Saint Augustine, Sermon 175.3.

"Since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us approach with a sincere heart and in absolute trust, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water" (Hebrews 10:22). We have nothing at all to fear if we follow Christ faithfully and obediently. We can listen to Jesus in confident trust because he himself is "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6) and "in him there is no darkness at all" (I John 1:5).

The disciples realized this truth, though without a doubt it took them some time to understand and accept it. It is the same with us. The Cross is often a stumbling block to the faith, but to those who do accept it tremendous grace is given. Such is the case with the disciples; this is why they were filled with "great joy" (Luke 24:53).

The disciples learned that their Maker subjected himself to countless kinds of abuses at the hands of the wicked and even to the sentence of death for their salvation. This effectively stirred them up to tolerate adversities of every kind for their salvation. They remembered that through his sacraments they had been cleansed, sanctified and united to the body of him who, when he had tasted death for them, presented an example of a speedy rising from death. For what other reason might they more fittingly receive the hope of their own resurrection?⁴

The Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord is our hope, for "where he has gone we hope to follow."⁵ "Let us hold

⁴ The Venerable Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, 11.9.

⁵ Preface I.

unwaveringly to our confession that gives us hope, for he who made the promise is trustworthy" (Hebrews 10:23). Amen.