

Homily for 7th Sunday in Easter – Thy Kingdom Come – Christian week of prayer from Ascension to eve of Pentecost.

A couple of days ago the church celebrated the Feast of Ascension, the day we remembered our Lord Jesus Christ departed from earth to heaven 40 days after his resurrection from death with his disciples and other followers gazing up to heaven as he went up. (I hope you had time to join Nick last Thursday, ascension day). This is the picture Luke the writer of the Acts of the apostles paints for us in today's reading. "While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"(Acts 1:10-11). The disciples and other followers were with him on the mount of Olives which is a sabbath day's journey from Jerusalem, even as he was ready to go to his Father in heaven Jesus continued to teach them and answer their questions. As he began to leave them, all they could do was to gaze into the sky, not sure what was happening in awe and wonder or perhaps surprise at what was happening to their Lord. If you remember a couple of weeks ago at his crucifixion on Good Friday, his disciples were scattered in fear and abandoned, neither witnessing or teaching others about God's kingdom. Some even returned to their previous professions but Jesus' appearance to them on numerous occasions after his resurrection meant they began to believe again and were strengthened by his presence. Now he is leaving them again, so it was not surprising that they were still gazing into the sky even when he was out of their sight and only reacted when the two angels spoke with them. Isn't that familiar to when we experience something out of the extraordinary, we are transfixed in a spot, it could be good or bad news and something we witness or experience and it might take someone calling us to our senses that we react. We were not told how long they stood gazing into the sky after Jesus was lifted into the clouds before the two men spoke to them. We will never know but it seems to me that what Luke (writer of Acts) might be saying, is for us to resist our questions of *Where?* and *How?* But instead that Jesus' departure from his followers is so that he might exercise his authority and influence over all things, places, and powers. The ascension does not mean the cessation of his ministry. It does not mean Jesus' absence. It does not mean the suspension of God's activity to reclaim the world. But rather the opposite.

The verses preceding the ascension narrative points us towards what God is yet to do and the role the apostles will play. When the two men in white clothes called the apostles and other followers to their senses, they did not order them to get to work. Although there is urgency in the reprimand to stop gazing into the sky, the moment's urgency does not result in immediate action.

The first great act of the apostles occurs when they travel back to Jerusalem . . . and wait, constantly devoting themselves to prayer.

Indeed, in time the apostles and the rest of Jesus' followers will be moving outward and bearing witness to Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. But not yet. In time the realities about which Jesus spoke--the kingdom of God, forgiveness of sins, release from the things that bind people--will come into clearer view.

We may overlook the waiting time in the 1st chapter of Acts because it is a brief narrative interlude building suspense for the eventual coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost which we will celebrate next Sunday. Yet the interval makes an important point about how God will interact with these people. Presumably the Holy Spirit could have come immediately after Jesus' ascension; but God waits or rather God has Jesus' followers wait. I like to think that in this waiting they learn, or begin to learn, that they are to be a responsive community, a community that waits upon God to initiate. We do not know whether they walked back to Jerusalem from the ascension with eager energy or paralyzing fear. All we know is that they have to wait.

The waiting has an active quality to it, going beyond merely sitting around and contemplating the past and future. The apostles wait secluded in a "room upstairs," where they are "constantly devoting themselves to prayer" along with others who followed Jesus, both men and women. The group remains excluded, yet expectant. In their waiting they obey Jesus' recent commands; but, even more, they also express a readiness for what is yet to come. The waiting period conditions them to be attentive to God, so that they might respond when the time is right.

They wait in a context of enormous and yet not fully explained expectations. They live in uneasy anticipation of the new realities that Jesus has initiated. Living like this requires just as much courage as if Jesus had told them to go out immediately and change the world using their own skills. Personally I find waiting difficult and in our present circumstances of covid-19 very hard to bear. However, today's scripture points us as a worshipping community of Christians in the present circumstances the opportunity to copy the example of the apostles and other followers of Jesus to wait devoting ourselves in prayer for God to do his work .

The apostles and the other followers wait, not because they see it as their only option, but because they expect big things to come from God--things in which they will be privileged to play important roles. Therefore, like the apostles and

the followers may we wait in anticipation, expectation for the renewal and restoration by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Amen.