

ASCENSION (May 21, 2023)

As we draw near to the end of the Easter season which will conclude next Sunday with the feast of Pentecost, we celebrate today Jesus' ascension into heaven. Our first reading put it plainly: "...as [the apostles] were looking on, he [Jesus] was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight." The risen Christ in the fullness of his bodily personhood entered into the immediate presence of his and our Father in heaven.

This is a truth of supreme importance for us: it means that our human nature, body and soul together, is now capable of being brought into heaven because Jesus, with his material, physical body like ours is now in heaven. Pope Francis puts it this way: "in Christ, true God and true man, our humanity was taken to God, Christ opened the path to us. ...if we let ourselves be guided by him, we are certain to be in safe hands". Pope Benedict said that, because of Jesus' ascension, "the human being has been taken into the very life of God." That is utterly amazing! Our individual personhood—body and soul together—is now able to share in the joy and love of the immediate and eternal presence of God...and to do so forever. This is true all and only because of Jesus' rising from the dead and ascending into heaven.

We have to admit that it's hard for us who are still living our earthly lives to imagine what heaven is. Although our first reading uses the image of Jesus being lifted up and a cloud taking him from their sight, we know that heaven is not, strictly speaking, a geographical place that we find on a map or to which we can send a space probe to investigate. When we were little, we maybe thought of heaven as being up there in the clouds. We can't help but wonder: just what is heaven like? One of my seminary classmates (now a priest in the diocese of Memphis TN) used to say, tongue in cheek, that he thought heaven would be boring—just sitting around in the clouds and doing nothing but singing 'hosanna, hosanna' over and over. Peter Kreeft has some amusing ideas about both heaven and hell:

- "The schools in heaven have no exams. The schools in hell have nothing but exams all the time." Take heart, students—no midterms or finals in heaven!
- "In hell everything is computerized and the computers are always down." Sounds familiar, doesn't it?
- And, given my pre-seminary career, this is one of my favorites: "In hell everyone is a lawyer." I don't remember hearing about that in law school...

In all seriousness, we can't have a full, true sense of the glory and joy of heaven—because we aren't there yet. And that's why we can get so easily fooled into thinking that the things of this world can bring total and lasting happiness...but they can't. Money, power, things, pleasure of whatever kind—such things may bring some surface level or fleeting joy, but it's nothing that endures and we just keep wanting more and more. I think I've told you about the single greatest sports moment in my life: I was at the Metrodome on October 27, 1991, for Game 7 of the World Series; the Twins beat the Braves 1-0 in ten innings and thus won the World Series. It was an incredible experience; I didn't have much of a voice for several days thereafter, and it was easy to think that thrill would never go away. Well, of course it did—1992 came along, the Twins had a decent season but didn't make the playoffs, and thus the disappointment of 'what have you done for me lately?'"

We need to remember a basic truth here: we are not complete; we cannot find full satisfaction in this earthly life. It's simply not possible. We can buy things, but the thrill wears off and we think we need to buy more to be fulfilled. Or we think 'if only I get that job or raise or promotion, then I'll be set for life'...and if we're fortunate enough to reach that goal, it won't be long before we realize that we are still unfulfilled, that we are still missing something.

There is a great article in the current issue of Our Sunday Visitor about Harrison Butker, the kicker for the Kansas City Chiefs who won the Super Bowl for them earlier this year with his last-second field goal. He recently gave a commencement talk at Georgia Tech (his alma mater) and had some real wisdom to share about the difference between success and fulfillment. He made the point that there are a whole lot of smart and talented people who are successful but still unhappy; he said: "In the end, no matter how much money you attain, none of it will matter if you are alone and devoid of purpose."

Butker is so right about this. Our ultimate purpose and reason for being is eternal union with God; he made us to desire that eternal union. Pope Benedict put it this way: "it becomes evident that man has need of a hope that goes further. It becomes clear that only something infinite will suffice for him, something that will always be more than he can ever attain." That's another way of saying what St. Augustine said in his Confessions some 1600 years ago in my favorite quote outside of the Bible: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Only God satisfies; only in God can we find perfect fulfillment and eternal joy; only in God will we be freed of that nagging feeling that something is still missing. It is indeed good and even necessary to strive for earthly goals for ourselves and our families as well as seeing to the needs of others out of a genuinely loving concern—Jesus was very clear about that. But lasting joy and fulfillment will and can come only when we are fully in union with God in heaven.

And—thanks be to God—that is something that is available to us because of the risen Christ. His ascension into heaven opened the path to that eternity; Jesus 'blazed the trail' for us into his kingdom. St. Paul said it so well in our second reading: "May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ...give you a Spirit of wisdom...that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of glory in his inheritance." May we never forget nor tire of thanking God for the priceless gift of that hope.