

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Sunday after the Ascension  
May 17, 2015

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The Ascension of Jesus took place on the fortieth day after Easter. Pentecost was the fiftieth day. This ten-day period between the two events was the first novena. It was a time of waiting in expectation and prayer by the gathered followers of the Lord. None of them could have predicted the experience of that great day of Pentecost or its after effects. Our annual commemoration of it is next week.

The New Testament considers the Ascension in two different yet complimentary ways. Saint Luke's Gospel and the second ending of St Mark's tell of the Ascension as the event it was. Saint Paul, *The Epistles to the Hebrews*, and Saint John the Divine see the Ascension as theological doctrine. They begin the Church's reflection on what it all means for us. It was Christ Himself Who said the withdrawal from earth of His visible presence was a necessary prelude to the coming of the Holy Spirit. He said, "If I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you." This portion of the high priestly prayer in St John's Gospel forms part of the theological reflection on the Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The Church soon understood what the disciples at the moment of the Ascension were only beginning to grasp: the followers of Christ would be a world-wide Catholic Church, not a tiny Palestinian sect centered on the Lord's visible bodily presence and unable to function apart from it. The Ascended Christ would make possible the coming of the Holy Spirit and the fulfillment of the Lord's promise: "Lo, I am with you always." It is important to understand precisely what this means and what it does not mean.

Christ's promise was not a word of consolation! The Lord did not say, "I'll be thinking of you and in Heaven I will look back on you with fond memories!" Nor is it His desire. Where is there good news in His followers beginning a perpetual process of wistful nostalgia; looking back to the Lord's incarnate life and sensing the farther we get from Biblical days the more remote is His presence! If that were the case Pentecost is nothing but a second-best consolation prize for losers!

Rather, two particular things happen in the Ascension of Christ. These began to be understood in *The Epistle to the Hebrews* and by the early Church fathers. *First*, the Ascension did not reverse or cancel Bethlehem. At Christmas God took flesh

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upon Himself. At the Ascension *God kept the flesh*. He did not shed His humanity like a discarded garment. The Lord took it to the right hand of the Father. That means our poor human nature has a splendid ambassador in the court of Heaven, One “Who was tempted in every way we are yet did not sin,” and Who effectively pleads our case. *Second*, at the Ascension the visible presence of our Redeemer passed into the sacraments. The Holy Spirit makes this happen, but the Ascension is why the sacraments are the outward and visible sign of Christ’s presence with us.

In the Gospel Jesus declares His disciples “are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.” Now there is no doubt in our minds Our Lord Jesus was *in* but certainly not *of* the world. How is it that He says in the same way we too are not of the world? What this means is everything in you and me that qualifies us to receive the Gospel in our hearts and become Christ’s disciples has its origin elsewhere than in this world. *Something supernatural is happening in you and me right now*. Our faith is not based on mere sight, but by doctrine whose authority is accepted in hearts that have been enlightened *from on high*. The passing of Christ’s visible presence into the Sacraments makes this possible, and our faith is strengthened by the operation of the Holy Spirit.

So Christ is with us all. Worldwide. In all ages. In that same way as when He walked the hills of Galilee. Every Mass is Bethlehem. Every healing of soul and body is the man at the Pool of Siloam. Every absolution is Mary Magdalene. Every Christian soul at the moment of death is the penitent thief Dismas. “I am with you always” is no fax or e-mail message! It is Gospel good news. Two thousand years cannot and do not shorten the arm of Christ nor weaken His power to accomplish what He promised. Since His Ascension the Lord Jesus is both in Heaven, “where He ever liveth to make intercession for us,” and here on earth, in a different manner to be sure, but in no lesser degree. That is because His promise, His desire, and His action, is to enter our hearts.

Saint John the Divine was inspired to record it this way. The Ascended Christ says, “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock; if any man hear my voice and open the

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door, I will come in to Him, and I will sup with Him and he with Me.” (*Revelation*  
3:20)