

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 13, 2018
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You know Scripture tells us the Ascension of Jesus took place forty days after Easter. Pentecost was the fiftieth day. This ten-day period was the first novena. It was a time of waiting in expectation and prayer by the followers of Christ. They awaited whatever He had in mind for them at Pentecost. None of them could have predicted the experience or its everlasting effects. Our annual commemoration is next Sunday.

The New Testament considers the Ascension in two different yet complimentary ways. St Luke and the second ending of St Mark describe the event. St John, St Paul, and *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, regard the Ascension as theological doctrine. These writers began the Church's reflection on what it all means for us.

The Lord Himself said the withdrawal from earth of His visible presence was a necessary prelude to the coming of the Holy Ghost. "If I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you." The Church soon began to understand what was happening. The followers of Christ would be a world-wide Catholic Church and not a tiny Palestinian sect. Up to this point they were few in number and centered upon His visible bodily presence and unable to function apart from it. The Ascension would make possible the coming of the Holy Ghost, which is the Spirit of Christ. This is not theological double talk! Because God is a Holy Trinity, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, and the Holy Spirit are all One. And so the coming of the Holy Ghost is the fulfillment of Christ's promise: "Lo, I am with you always." It is important to understand what this means and what it does *not* mean.

Christ's promise was not a word of farewell consolation. The Lord did not say: "I'll be thinking of you from Heaven and looking back on you with fond memories!" The Divine plan was not that His followers begin a perpetual process of wistful nostalgia, looking back on His incarnate life and sensing the farther we get from Biblical days the more remote is His Presence. If that were the case the promised indwelling of the Holy Ghost would be nothing but a consolation prize for losers!

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Rather, two particular things happened in the Ascension. They are reflected 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 upon Himself. But at the Ascension *God kept the flesh*. That means our poor human nature has a splendid ambassador in the court of Heaven. He is One “Who was tempted in every way as we are yet did not sin” and Who effectively pleads our case. And second, because of the Ascension the visible presence of our Redeemer was able to *pass into the sacraments*. The Ascension makes it possible for the sacraments to be the outward and visible sign of Christ’s presence with us.

In the Gospel the Lord declares His disciples “Are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.” Everything in you that qualifies you to receive the Gospel in your heart and become Christ’s disciple has its origin elsewhere than in this world. Something supernatural is happening in you right now. Our faith is not based on mere sight but on 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 abiding presence of the Holy Ghost.

The result is that Christ is with us all worldwide, in all ages, in the 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! Two thousand years cannot and do not shorten the arm of Christ or 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 and His desire are to enter our hearts.

In *The Revelation to St John the Divine* it is the Ascended Christ Who says “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock; if any man hear My voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and I will sup with him and he with Me.” (3:20)