

The Seventh Sunday of Easter: The Sunday after Ascension Day (B), 13 May 2018
Saint Ignatius of Antioch Episcopal Church in the City of New York

O God, the King of glory, who hast exalted thine only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph unto thy kingdom in heaven: We beseech thee, leave us not comfortless, but send to us thine Holy Ghost to comfort us, and exalt us unto the same place whither our Saviour Christ is gone before; who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. *Amen.*

Exodus 28:1-4, 9-10, 29-30

Acts 1:15-26

John 17:11b-19

This past Thursday evening we celebrated Ascension Day, the fortieth day after Easter, when the Church remembers Jesus' Ascension into heaven. I suggested then that this must have been a truly tumultuous time for the disciples. They had journeyed with Jesus throughout his ministry, come with him to Jerusalem, saw him enter in triumph, only to be arrested and put to the death of the Cross. They had seen him into the tomb, thought him dead and gone (disbelieving Jesus' own words about what would come to pass). They had then been surprised by his return in the flesh to be among them, felt the joy of knowing that Jesus had defeated death, come to see the world and God's relation to it in a completely new light, been inspired by this Risen Christ, and now, now Jesus was taken from them again:

And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

This report of the Ascension from Acts gives us the sense of surprise that the disciples must have felt and contains a promise that something else will happen, something will come to sustain us now Jesus is gone again.

Despite the promise, however, the disciples must have been confused and uncertain. Despite Luke's Gospel account that after Jesus departed, "they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God," I have to believe the disciples were discomfited. It is only natural and deep down I feel strongly that it is helpful for us to try to get a sense of what it was like for the disciples in those ten days between the Ascension and what we know will happen on Pentecost when the disciples will be filled by the Holy Spirit. It is important that we live into this moment of uncertainty, for us to get a little more comfortable not knowing for sure what will come next. It is important because the life of the Christian in the post-Ascension, even the post-Pentecost, world can be one of uncertainty.

We live in a time when love and justice seem to be continually under attack from the forces of venality and self-interest, of hate and exclusion. We live in a time when we don't know exactly what will come next and from whence our salvation and our strength will come. We live in a time when we need to take heart in what has already unfolded, in what God has already done for and given us. We need to take heart in the reality of the resurrection, of Love's victory over death and God's promise of vindication. We need to have the faith of Christ, the experienced relationship we already have with God, with God in Christ, and remember what we have already been

given and act accordingly.

The continuation of Jesus' farewell discourse that we have for our Gospel today helps us, reminds us, of our connection to God and the mission that Jesus has given us. When Jesus was carrying out his ministry in the world, he reminds us, he "kept" us, "guarded" us, and now that he is leaving, he has given us his commandment, the commandment to "love one another," to love one another as he has loved us and as God has loved him. That love, we learned last week, asks for sacrifice, for unselfishness, to act in the best interests and on behalf of others for their own sake and not for our personal gain.

This is, I think, what Jesus means when he says, "I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." In this context (in John's language and world view) the goodness of creation is not being called into question, rather here Jesus is referring to the powers and forces of the world that stand in opposition to the work of God. It becomes clearer as Jesus continues,

I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

We are not to be freed from this realm or this work and simply taken up into heaven.

The world is the plane of divine activity and yet Jesus is not tied to the forces that

stand against Love and neither are we. Protected and loved, we are here to carry out the work of loving one another as God has loved us, not to serve other interests. In short, Jesus is telling us we have a job to do and we are given authority to carry out this work.

In this liminal time, this in between time, this moment after Jesus' Ascension, we sit in uncertainty, not knowing exactly what will come next, not knowing what the next moment, the next news bulletin, the next alert on our phone, the next tweet will bring. And yet, we have already experienced Easter, we have known what it is like to share the meal in which Jesus is present with us and that nourishes us with the bread of life, strengthens us for the days ahead, we have heard Jesus words and they ring true because we have known his love. Even though we don't know the whole story, we don't know the exact ending or how it will unfold, we can remain steadfast knowing one thing: that we are loved, that God has already acted, and that we have the capacity to receive and return divine love to the world. Let this sustain us in these days, let us practice this in-between moment so that when that moment comes in the world, as it inevitably will (and sooner than we think), that we can quieten our anxiety and discomfort and proceed with our loving work.

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