

BETWEEN THE ASCENSION AND PENTECOST

By Jim Seghers

St. Matthew's Gospel ends with the great commission to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:18-20). However, in this essay I wish to begin our focus on the immediate context of that passage. Matthew identified the disciples as "the eleven" (Mt 28:16), which was a sad reminder of Judas' fate (Mt. 27:3-10), and the wounds inflicted on Jesus' heart by all unfaithful disciples.

He also tells us that they went "to the mountain to which Jesus directed them" (Mt 28:16). Mountains played an important role in Jesus' ministry (Mt 5:1; 8:1; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1, 9). When they met Jesus, St. Matthew reported they "saw" him. This is the only time Matthew reported the apostles actually witnessing the resurrected Jesus. Their reaction is instructive. They "worshiped him" (Mt 28:17), an act that acknowledged Jesus' divinity. The same Greek verb for worship (*proskyneō*) was used in connection with the disciple's exclamation "Truly you are the Son of God" (Mt 14:33) when Jesus prevented Peter from sinking after he walked on the water.

What followed immediately is very surprising. St. Matthew gives the startling disclosure, "but some doubted" (Mt 28:17), a passage that could be translated, "but they [all] doubted." Clearly, the Apostles did not doubt the divinity of Jesus, or the reality of the Resurrection. The rare verb St. Matthew chose (*distazo*) is only found in one other place in the New Testament when Jesus said to Peter, "Why did you doubt" (Mt 14:31).

This second connection with the narrative of Peter walking on the water clearly underscores the Apostles' doubts about themselves, not their lack of faith in Jesus. The events of Good Friday changed the Apostles. They were no longer boastfully self-confident. They knew that Jesus was going to leave them. They were well aware that they had an enormously arduous mission to fulfill. They knew persecution and hardships awaited them. They were now painfully aware of their many limitations. No wonder they exhibited a conflicted state of mind.

There are times when we, too, are afraid. We often doubt ourselves with good reason because of our past failures and the pain of our present difficulties. As we struggle with the trials of modern living, we may wistfully long for the advantages of the Apostles. After all, Jesus was their teacher. They had the benefit of observing the goodness that radiated from him. They watched his love in action. They talked, ate, walked, and slept with Jesus on an intimate daily basis. They frequently spoke and dined with him during the forty days that followed the Resurrection. They also had the advantages of his final instructions. Nevertheless, Jesus gives us a different perspective.

He said to Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (Jn 20:29). The vast majority of Christians fall into that category. It is helpful to recall, that even after their intimate encounters with Jesus, the apostles remained relatively inert. The great equalizer between them and us is the

dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit. It is this indwelling presence (1 Cor 3:16; 6:15, 19) of a divine Person of Love that reassures us, “If God is for us, who is against us” (Rom 8:31)? St. Paul continues to buttress our confidence with the reminder that the Father “who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not also give us *all things with him*” (Rom 8:32)? Like St. Paul we can now affirm confidently even amid our insecurities, “I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).

There is a sense that Jesus’ Ascension confirmed his promise that they would be “baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5), and the great and terrible day when Christ would return in glory (Acts 1:11). St. Luke informs us that the disciples returned from the Ascension “with great joy” (Lk 24:52). During the waiting period that followed “they devoted themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14; cf. Lk 24:53). Herein we discover a great challenge because in our hectic culture prayer is often squeezed out of our daily routine.

There is a sense, I think, that when we pray we judge we are doing very little. That is true, *we* are doing very little, but *God* is doing quite a lot. This is a lesson I learned through many failures, and we must all continually relearn. When I was in the business world my prayer life, like my spiritual life because they are inseparably connected, went hot and cold. Being a slow learner, I eventually learned a vital lesson.

When I worked more and prayed less, the business never thrived. But when I prayed more and worked less, the business always did better. What made the difference? When I worked more and prayed less, I only brought me to the office with all my strengths and limitations. However, when I prayed more and worked less, I brought less of me to the office and more of Jesus. The people I worked with needed exactly what I needed, a lot less of me and a lot more of Jesus. So it was with the Apostles.

The period between the Ascension and Pentecost was not an empty time of waiting, a kind of collective holding of the breath. *They* were doing very little, but the *Holy Spirit* was already dynamically active. He prepared them by internalizing the lessons of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Years later the last member of their apostolic brotherhood would write:

“Even when we were dead through our trespasses, [the Father] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places *in Christ Jesus*” (Eph 2:5-6).

It takes quiet time in prayer to grasp the astounding reality that Jesus’ personal Resurrection and Ascension into God’s glory is now partially fulfilled in us as we await its complete fulfillment, which is our destiny. This reality can only be realized *in Christ*. Prayer acknowledges our helplessness and our utter dependency on God. This admission and the surrender that follows empty us of self and the false values of this world. This essential prerequisite makes room for the dynamic transforming activity of the Holy Spirit.

The marvel of the Father’s love is that he always seeks to incorporate his flawed human sons and daughters into the Family business of the Blessed Trinity, which is the salvation

of souls. Through the Church corporately and in each member individually, Christ is present on earth. Now those who want to encounter the Savior will meet him in his Church and in his members – for better or for worse. Can anyone doubt that the present abandonment of Christian values is attributable to the example of unfaithful Christians, not the power of Christ to transform our world? Here we discover our mission. Every day we meet people in our families and in the work place. Do they meet Christ in us?

The blessing of Pentecost that the Apostles awaited in fervent prayer would transform them and us into Jesus. In this way our weak hands become his strong hands, our feeble deeds become his efficacious deeds, and our fickle heart becomes his enflamed faithful heart. Thus the Ascension looks to Pentecost and the dispositions needed to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit. This idea is captured in my favorite prayer, which was composed by St. John Gabriel Perboyre who was martyred in China in 1850.

The Jesus Prayer

O my Divine Savior, transform me into yourself.
May my hands be the hands of Jesus.
May my tongue be the tongue of Jesus,
Grant that every faculty of my body may serve only to glorify you.
Above all, transform my soul and all its powers,
that my memory, my will and my affections
may be the memory, the will and the affections of Jesus.
I pray you to destroy in me all that is not you.
Grant that I may live but in you and for you,
and that I may truly say with St. Paul:
“I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).