

May 24, 2009

A beautiful hymn often used as the processional hymn at Mass begins: "We are a pilgrim people. We are the Church of God, one family of believers, disciples of the Lord." I like to think of our time on earth as a pilgrimage to our heavenly home. God has planned for us something much greater than we could ever imagine. The Feast of the Ascension, which we celebrate this weekend, reminds us of our eternal destiny.

After Jesus rose from the dead, He appeared to His apostles and disciples several times over the course of 40 days. He continued to instruct them about the kingdom of God. Then, after assuring them that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them so that they would remain faithful witnesses to Him, Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took Him from their sight. His Ascension remains a source of great hope for us as it reminds us of our purpose in this life and our eternal destiny.

At the Last Supper, Jesus had spoken about His departure in this way: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Have faith in God and faith in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places; otherwise, how could I have told you that I was going to prepare a place for you?" (Jn 14:1-2).

How comforting it is when burying our family members and loved ones, or when thinking about our own death, to recall those words of Jesus assuring us that all is not ended with death. Rather, death is but the transition from our journey on this earth to the destiny which Jesus has awaiting us.

The saints approached death with deep faith and a sense of joy. St. Thomas More joked with his executioner: "Be not afraid. You send me to God."

St. Ambrose tells us that St. Agnes went to her execution “more cheerfully than others to their wedding.”

We prepare ourselves for our eternal destiny by living in response to God’s love and abiding presence to us. In Baptism, we became members of Jesus’ living Body and we accepted Him as our Savior. Through our Godparents, we promised to live as His disciples accepting Him as our Way, Truth, Light, and Life. Our sure way to eternal glory is to live so connected to Christ that we could say with St. Paul that “it is not I who live but Christ Jesus who lives in me!” (Gal 2:20).

However, in God’s plan, it is not enough to be concerned just about our own destiny. Before ascending into heaven, Jesus said: “You will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.” In Baptism, we received a responsibility to carry on Jesus’ mission of bringing more truth, peace, justice, and love into our world. We, through our example and through our words, are to draw others to Christ and lead them to live by the truth He brings to us about God, about ourselves, and about the relationship God desires with us.

In other words, our relationship with Christ is not merely a private matter. Our love for Him has repercussions for those in our families, parishes, neighborhoods, and workplaces.

Faith has a public dimension. While it is intensely personal, it must, at the same time, transform others with whom we live and associate.

When this journey of life is over, we will all have to give an accounting of ourselves and our actions. The Lord will ask whether we attended to Him in the hungry, poor, alienated, sick, imprisoned, and disenfranchised. He will ask: Is the world a better place because of us? Were we instrumental, as members of His living Body, for bringing more truth, compassion, justice, and love to our families and communities?

While we have an incredible destiny, we also have a challenging mission. However, there is nothing to fear. Jesus promised not to leave us orphans. He remains with us, Emmanuel, in the Eucharist, in His words in the Sacred Scriptures, when the community of believers is gathered, in the poor we serve, and in the Holy Spirit He promised.

During this week, we pray for a deeper awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We will celebrate the bestowal of the Holy Spirit next Sunday on the Feast of Pentecost.