

First Reading – Acts 1:1-11

Responsorial – Psalm 46(47):2-3,6-9

Second Reading – Ephesians 1:17-23

Gospel – Matthew 28:16-20

Sunday Gospel Reflection – The Ascension of the Lord

May 24, 2020

In this Sunday's Gospel, the eleven disciples receive what is known as the 'Great Commission' of the faith. Before ascending into heaven, Christ gives the early Church community their marching orders: to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19).

The centrality of this Great Commission cannot be over-emphasized. In his great encyclical on evangelization, Pope Saint Paul VI made the striking claim that the Church exists for only one purpose: evangelization. All of the Church's structures, communities, and sacraments are ordered to this one mission. The word evangelization derives from the Latin for "good news". What is this good news? Of course, it is that Christ has taken upon himself our sins, has buried them in death, and has gloriously resurrected.

However, the feast of the Ascension gives us another angle on the Great Commission. While we tend to understand the Resurrection as good news, the Ascension can be misunderstood. Christ ascending into the clouds might suggest that evangelization is all up to us. After all, Christ left us immediately after the commission. Evangelism thus becomes a matter of human will-power. This degrades into an activism: maximize all our efforts! It is up to us after all. Then, when our efforts meet resistance and inevitably fail, our ensuing bitterness then fosters 'retreatism': shore up the walls, abandon the world, and let it choke on its own vices. The Great Commission thus ends in a 'Great Dismission': as a failure.

Christ's first and last words in the Commission are terribly important to refute the idea that it is "all up to us". Jesus states: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.... *And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age*" (Mt 28:18, 20). The first part of the statement is curious. Jesus is divine; as God, he already has authority over the cosmos. We realize then that his *humanity* is receiving authority. God has not just re-asserted his prominence, he has actually granted us a new Adam, a new human king, who *leads the charge*.

The last part of the statement, "I am with you always" reminds us of the messianic title Emmanuel, meaning "God is with us". Rather than leaving the Church in the dust, Christ leads the Church to the heavenly court. Far from absent, he continuously works with us, in us, and through us to make the good news a reality. Thus, the Christian life is listening to and following the initiatives of our king, who surveys the battlefield from the highest vantage point.

In essence, the great commission is about participation. This participation is neither just activity nor passivity, but is receptive and cooperative. Christ's promise to be with us eases our anxieties but also gives us a challenge to conversion. Where do we act as though Christ's words applied to ourselves: "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"? Who are the people we despair of, thinking that our efforts will never succeed, and so we never follow up on? The Great Commission is a high demand, but Christ provides the strength and joy to carry it out.