

MAKING SENSE OF ASCENSION SUNDAY

In the Creed today we will be saying of Jesus: *'He ascended into heaven.'* What picture comes to mind when we think of him ascending into heaven? Do we picture him going up into the stratosphere like a space ship at Cape Canaveral? If we do, we show that we don't realize that the words of scripture about this are not to be taken literally. They are a poetic way of saying that Jesus is no longer on earth in a fleshly, physical and material way. The words of scripture mean that he has gone to God in his risen body and lives with God in light and glory. What they mean is that God who raised him from the dead has therefore honoured and exalted him.

Does his being with God mean he is no longer with us? Certainly not! He is actually with us more strongly, more powerfully, than when he walked the roads and streets of Palestine. He is with us in spirit, i.e. in his gift to us of the Holy Spirit. He acts on us in all the down-to-earth ways that the Spirit influences us.

So we don't go looking for him on the clouds or in the sky. We find him in our reading, hearing and heeding of the scriptures, which speak of him. We find him in our celebration of the sacraments. Each of the seven sacraments is a sign of his presence and action upon us here and now. This is especially true of the Eucharist, which is specifically the sign and presence of his now glorified and spiritualized body. We find him in our practical love for our neighbour, and especially for our fellow human beings who are poor, neglected, sad, sorrowing, afraid or despairing.

But if Jesus is no longer visible in the old familiar ways, how will people come to know of his presence? The answer is that he is present through us. So on this Feast of the Ascension we remember too the mission he gave us his followers before he went home to God. This is to go and tell everyone everywhere the good news that Jesus is alive and is our Saviour - the one who changes people for the better through his gift of the Holy Spirit. So, before he disappears from sight he says to his followers in every century, *'You are my witnesses'*, and that in order to witness to him *'you will be clothed with the power from on high'*, the power that is the Holy Spirit. On the subject of witnessing, it's worth remembering that Pope Paul VI said that *'the world needs witnesses more than it needs teachers'*. In fact, the world is full teachers, most of them true and good, but has far fewer witnesses, i.e. people who speak with their lives. Between the two roles there is the same difference as between saying and doing. A well-known proverb underlines this difference: *'Actions speak louder than words'*, more recently put by the rappers as: *'Walk the walk, not just talk the talk.'*

Being witnesses to Jesus is a very important role for parents of children, and especially when they are asked to help their children get ready for First Reconciliation, Confirmation, and First Holy Communion. The words which parents say in each of these steps about meeting Jesus and belonging to the Church will mean nothing if the parents don't practise what they preach. What will the children think if their parents don't go to Mass on Sunday, don't ever make the sign of the cross with them, and don't ever pray with them? The souls of children

are like sheets of photographic film. Everything they see and hear in their childhood years leaves a trace, an imprint. One day the *'film'* will be *'developed'* and it will have its effects, good or bad.

So, in summary, in ascending to heaven, Jesus has not left us. He has merely disappeared from our sight. This is similar to the Eucharist. So long as the host is outside us, we see it and we adore it. When we receive the host we no longer see it. It has disappeared from sight, but it has disappeared so that Jesus in the host can be within us, and be present to us in a new way, and an even more powerful way than when he walked our earth in the flesh. So, like the first disciples, we are not sad that Jesus has disappeared from sight but glad, because he is still with us and still loving us in very many ways.

At Mass today, let's make a point of thanking God that Jesus is not only risen and exalted into glory with God, but that he is still with us in powerful and loving ways, and above all through the gift of his Spirit, his alter ego, his second self!

bgleesoncp@gmail.com