

Ascension

Friday was the 50th anniversary of my graduation from St. Therese Little Flower grade school at 58th and Michigan here in Kansas City. We had a class reunion that night. Fifty-six of us graduated. We couldn't find everyone. Quite honestly, we couldn't even remember everyone. But we did locate enough to hold our reunion back at our former parish. We had never done this before, so some traveled from the East and West coasts just to be here; some friends from other classes also joined the fun. We all have memories of grade school, but especially of graduation.

In English we use a peculiar word for graduation. We call it "commencement", a word that means "beginning." When I prepared for graduation, I was finishing something - years of study, final exams, extracurricular activities. I was saying goodbye to teachers and friends I'd known most of my life, many of whom I would not see again. I never knew that I'd have to wait fifty years to see some of them one more time, and that we would say hello at the same place where we last said goodbye.

Every graduation is, of course, a commencement. It is a beginning of the next stage of life. With every goodbye comes new freedom, but also comes new responsibility. You take charge of the next stage of your life. You step into the future on your own. You hope that you have all the tools you're going to need - but you really don't know if you do.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, his disciples stood flatfooted between goodbye and hello, between past and future. In fact, St. Luke uses the ascension as a hinge to connect his two great books: his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. His gospel ends with a brief account of the ascension, and Acts opens with the more elaborate account that we hear as the first reading today.

The ascension was a commencement, though not a welcome one. The disciples had grown attached to their teacher, and they did not feel ready to step into the future on their own. They hoped that they had all the tools they needed. In reality, they lacked only one, one that the Father would send them, the Holy Spirit. But the transitional time between the Ascension and Pentecost probably felt awkward.

We all face transitional times in our lives, times for which we may never feel completely prepared. After you've taken a test, you wait for the results. After you get hired, you wait for your first paycheck. After you see your doctor, you wait for the lab reports. Transitional moments bring an awkward feeling because we don't yet know how they're going to turn out - for good or for ill, for better or for worse. But we still go forward in hope.

The ascension of Jesus marks his graduation from earthly life, but more importantly the commencement of his disciples' ministry. We too are his disciples. We too must be ready to step forward into the future with the tools we have at hand. We do this not in fear but in hope. Christ has already given us the Holy Spirit, and every time we come to a time of transition, we can be sure that the Spirit will give us the tools we need to speak and do the will of God.

SUNDAY, MAY 28, 2017