

Ascension

Despite pleas from all sides not to politicize the virus, we do, which may say more about us Americans than it does about the virus. Although we say we want unity, we often take shelter in divisions where we enjoy support from those who think as we do and clarify disagreements with those who do not. Most of us have long practiced antisocial distancing from people who disagree with us about politics, viruses, or faith.

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians opens with an acknowledgment of a division regarding faith. As you know from your own families, this is one of the most emotional of divisions. When someone in your household holds a belief different from yours, the mixing of these two realities poses challenges. What do you do when someone you love no longer holds your values?

We hear this passage as the second reading for Ascension Sunday because of its section about Christ after the resurrection: Paul writes, God the Father of glory worked his great might raising Christ from the dead "and seating him at his right hand in the heavens.... He put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body." This is one of the passages behind the line in our creed that Christ "sits at the right hand of God." Furthermore, the complementarity between Christ as head and the church as body inspired many of the prayers in the mass for today, which declare that the head has ascended on high, and that is where we the body naturally yearn to be. Those beliefs about the exaltation of Christ make this passage work for the Ascension Mass.

Nonetheless, inside the Letter to the Ephesians, the expression of these beliefs has another purpose. Paul is declaring all these wonderful deeds of God because some of the people reading this letter do not accept Christ. Paul loves them, but they do not hold the same beliefs. Unlike us, who maybe stay away from people with different viewpoints or at least talk about them only behind their backs, thus creating a dichotomy between what we believe and how we act, Paul reaches right out to the Ephesians with an attitude consonant with his faith. He does not scold them; he does not belittle them; he does not even confront them. He invites them with loving words. Listen again to the opening of this passage: "May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of him. May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened that you may know... what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe." Paul wants unbelievers on board. To show them how powerful God is, he tells them about the ascension of Christ.

Today's celebration gives us reason to rejoice. Christ did not leave us. You might say, he just started working from home. The ascension of Christ the head begins the great yearning of us his body to reunite with him. Our belief in the ascension is a belief in the power of God. When we find ourselves at odds with other people, we may take a page from Paul's letter. Instead of distancing from them or condemning them, perhaps we could pray for them and tell them that we hope God will give them a Spirit of wisdom and revelation. Faith is not something anyone does on their own; it comes first from God. Even with people who do not see things our way, God is powerful and the Ascension of Christ shows why.

Sunday, May 24, 2020