

Ascension of the Lord Year B

May 15-16, 2021

He put all things beneath his feet

Readings: Acts 1: 1-11; Ephesians 1: 17-23; Mark 16: 15-20

I noticed nearly 100 public high school students out front as well as in the courtyard yesterday afternoon taking pictures prior to their Senior prom. We are happy to serve as a backdrop. The familiar cry of many graduating high school and college seniors each Spring may be summarized with the sentiment, “I cannot wait to get out of here and onto the next phase of my life.” We’ve all been there and understand!

Students yearn for a world that seems much wider open– it is time for the next chapter. Our first reading asks: “why are you standing there looking at the sky?” It is a call to move on. It signals it is time for a new chapter in the Church as well.

Our second reading from Saint Paul reminds us that Christ has “put all things beneath his feet.” The first impression from this phrase is clearly one of subjection. We speak of parents keeping their children under their thumb, bosses holding the feet of employees to the fire, and ‘keeping tabs’ on people so that we know there whereabouts. In today’s Letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul explains the unique position of Jesus Christ as Head of the Church with the image of the Church as the Body of Christ.

Paul says the church carries “the fullness” of Christ, who himself fills all things in every way. When we enter a church, we encounter the presence of the fullness of Christ. He fulfills our deepest desires for meaning in life, yet he does so as head of the Church, reminding us that our fullness of life is meant to be lived, not privately, but very personally in the midst of the Church, of which we are members. The communal aspect of faith is not an add-on; it is constitutive of the Catholic vision.

The word “church” carries a universal sense, including all believers. The gathering of the Church occurs in the name of Jesus Christ; the Church “meets” because it is called together in Christ.

As the community of believers, the Church is the assembly (*ekklesia*) of all who believe in Jesus Christ. It is much more than a building, even a beautiful one. Since the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church has defined herself as a union of human beings who are united by the profession of the same Christian faith, and through participation in the same sacraments under the direction of their lawful pastors, especially of the one representative of Christ on earth, the Bishop of Rome.

The Feast of the Ascension highlights that even while Jesus has returned to the Father in heaven, nevertheless he remains head of the Church, for the Church is the Body of Christ. He is not absent from us. Christ is here with us by his divinity, power and love. Saint Augustine commented on this feast. “We cannot be in heaven, as he is on earth, by divinity, but in him, we can be there by love.”¹

It also serves as a call for our own future. Where Christ reigns in heaven, He invites us to join the Church triumphant, those countless souls who have persevered in God’s grace and now sings psalms, hymns and inspired songs to God. Augustine also drew the distinction between promise and fulfillment. What has been promised us, has not yet been fulfilled in our bodies: “Christ is now exalted above the heavens, but he still suffers on earth all the pain that we, the members of his body, have to bear.”²

The Lord does not keep all things under His feet in order to stifle us, but to protect the Church by subjugating evil. This enables us to discover our true freedom as members of the Body, each according to our own role. Despite its power, evil can and never will ultimately triumph in the Church. If we stay united to Him, neither will it triumph in our own lives. Where He is, the Lord is leading us to meet Him. “God mounts his throne to shouts of joy.” Let us eagerly go forth in joy and gladness, ready to meet Him.

¹ cf. Augustine, *Sermo de Ascensione Domini* Mai 98, 1-2: PLS 2, 494-495)

² Ibid.