

FEAST OF THE ASCENSION

Acts 1: 1-11; Ephesians 1: 17-23; Matthew 28: 16-20

Friends leaving us because they have been transferred to another work place, wish to live their retirement years somewhere else, have died—all of these are common experiences that punctuate our lives. All of these tug at the heart strings.

Today we celebrate Christ's return to his Father, his leaving this earth where he had prayed and worked, laughed and cried, drawn friends to himself. But the tug at the human heart is missing. The apostles stand in amazement, not sorrow. The psalm verse prophetically announces that "God mounts his throne to shouts of joy," while the second reading calls us to hope as Christ is seated at God's right hand "far above every principality, authority, power and dominion." How can such a human experience provoke such an apparently unhuman response?

The answer is not that difficult to find, for it lies in the very nature of the feast itself. The Ascension is not about the human experience of loss, but about the human experience of commissioning, of commencement, of beginning anew; it, thus, brings with it amazement and joy rather than the expected sadness.

The Apostles have been commissioned to take all that they have received from Christ and share it with others. The preparation period is over. It is now their chance, their call. They will gather for prayer before they open the door of the upper room and preach their first sermon. Yes, there is some fear. But the time has come. Now under the guidance of the Spirit, they will go forth in a very different manner, one that, at least on occasion, will surprise even them.

Their call is ours, renewed yearly in our celebration of the Ascension and Pentecost. Today we once again receive our commission to live, to be Jesus Christ in our world. Next week we will celebrate Pentecost when we will be blessed yet again for that mission. May this intervening week be for us, as it was for the Apostles, a time of prayer, readying us to receive the outpouring of the Spirit, who wishes to renew us in heart and spirit. We, too, must be ready to be surprised by the Spirit.