

HOMILY ASCENSION SUNDAY ESSENDON 2021
DON'T JUST LOOK UP, BUT LOOK AROUND AS WELL

Mk 16.15-20 AA 1.1-11 Eph 4.1-13

On Friday I was asked to talk to our Grade 1 students about what school was like *in the olden days*, as put by the teachers! I didn't know whether or not to take offence, as I've never considered myself part of the *olden days*. Then again, on reflection, I thought again, and it was in 1959 that I started in Grade 1, finished in Grade 2 (skipping Grade 1 at Easter due to numbers!), and won the Religion prize, a book on the *Our Father*, which I am still able to *show and tell*! So, I guess, it was in some ways, the olden, but certainly not golden days! There were the Presentation Sisters with their long habits, and showing only their faces, some with a degree of severity, absent these days, thankfully! They were still the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass times, writing with pencils and then pen-nibs dipped in inkwells, blotting paper, biros forbidden, and blackboards with chalk and chalk dust, without any other technology at all! I was asked if I had a girlfriend back then, and what games we played outside, as I recalled playing and losing all of my marbles, then yo-yos, hula hoops and hopscotch, not being into football or cricket or running, as one of the shortest and most timid in my class!

Still, as I thought back, the faith was conveyed, in the Catholic tradition, with my little book on the *Our Father* taking each line and explaining its meaning. And there was a special memory of *First Communion Day*. I have a clear recollection of Jesus being presented as God's Son, but in a realistic and personal way. There was too much emphasis on fear, sin and punishment, but also an image of Jesus as kind, friendly and forgiving. His fundamental message has not changed, but is now portrayed in a more positive way, with the assurance his presence endures among us.

That is really the message of Ascension, as we hear his farewell message, in the words of Mark and Luke today. We need to remember that these were written down some 30 to 50 years after the physical departure of Jesus, and in the context of the challenges of life in the early church communities, where differences had arisen, and persecution was a reality. There was need to encourage new believers to persevere in the Christian life, and to see that it was an ongoing commitment, not just a free ticket to salvation and heaven through a one stop stop at Baptism!

On the top of the Mount of Olives is a small chapel, built by the crusaders way back there, now, funnily enough, owned by the Moslems, however that happened. They allow the Christians in for a celebration each year at Ascension, but it's a tourist magnet for income the rest of the year, although perhaps not so much at present, with the current hostilities and their tragic consequences ongoing. Inside is a concrete slab, with an imprint of a very large foot, which is presented as a remnant of Jesus' final departure, as he took off to heaven, to return to the Father. It's an obvious fake, but the tourists pay to see it, as I did back there in January 1977!

As we hear in today's account in Acts of the Apostles, as the disciples all look up to the sky or heavenwards, as if wondering what to do next. Quite a few artistic depictions give us this image, but the addition to the end of Mark's Gospel just states Jesus was *taken up into heaven*, with no attempt at description of the event. As believers, we have to accept the mystery, and not seek a literal interpretation of the details. The fact of faith is that Jesus' presence endures, just as he promised, despite his physical absence from then on. (Luke takes 40 days, with the Spirit descending after 50 at Pentecost, with John's Gospel having the Spirit bestowed by Jesus on that same day as his Resurrection, as we've already heard.)

It is the mission that counts, and there is now talk of the mission to which we are all called through Baptism, to live our faith in practical ways, celebrating Word and Sacrament as a community, enlivened by the Spirit, whose coming we commemorate next week. Yet, we need to remember the Spirit is with us here and now, for us to respond, in practical and active ways.

The additional end of Mark's Gospel is a bit over the top, when it speaks of demons being driven out, tongues being spoken, snakes being picked up and drinking poison without ill-effects! To my mind, these images refer to evil being overcome with good and positive thoughts, words and deeds, in the name of Jesus, and the sick being healed indicative of good pastoral and medical care, as we all have to face our physical frailty and ultimate mortality!

Thomas O'Loughlin, English priest and history professor, suggests: "*The Paschal candle remains lit; the Lord does not abandon us... The Lord's presence is no longer limited to a small group in one place at a particular time, but is now diffused throughout creation, through his body, the Church... To celebrate this feast is not to recall a past event, that day long ago 'when he went up to heaven'. Rather, it is to rejoice that Jesus is our living Lord who is with us now, leading and guiding us, because he is not tied down to a moment in earthly history... We live in **The Age of the Church**... We have to build a world of justice, truth and peace (and I'll throw in **love** as well!)... The Ascension is not a cozy feast; it should make us feel uncomfortable.*"

Claude Mostowik MSC reminds us too: "*Ascension is not about Christ's absence, but his presence everywhere. We are reminded that it is not just how Jesus is present in the world, but our presence. We cannot separate our presence and his witness... Living in the reign of God is about discovering and learning to live in harmony with God who is in our midst... Jesus has left his footprints (and not the one in the concrete block in the Mount of Olives!) for us to follow in.*"

So here we are now, pondering the meaning for us, not just looking up with hands joined, but around us, with arms and hearts opened wide, determined to continue to live and spread his message of Good News.

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