

From the Holy Gospel: **While He blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy.** [Luke 24.51-52 RSV]

You might be tempted to consider our Lord’s Ascension as a good-bye. But it is not so. Christ’s Ascension is not a good-bye, though we see him no more, nor is it an ending, a time to be sad. Instead, the disciples lead us to a different understanding of our Lord’s Ascension, an understanding that means returning to Jerusalem with great joy, and leads us to rejoice in “The Blessing of the Ascension.”

I.

Jesus tells His disciples, before He mounts the holy cross on Good Friday, that He is headed for the cross and grave, indeed, but then, too, he is headed for the empty tomb and victorious appearances of Easter. He is headed for the resurrection from the dead, but He is also headed for a brief reunion with His troubled and fearful disciples. He is to be reunited with them, but He also is headed to depart again, on the day of His Ascension. The Ascension comes as the latest of this series of strange and wonderful promises that Jesus makes.

But, the Ascension is in no way the end. It is not the *deus ex machina*, as the ancients called it in the drama, where the hero is rescued at just the moment when all seems lost, by a basket dropped from the heights above the stage, the “God-from-the-Machine” rescue. That is NOT what you have in the Ascension. The Ascension is not the convenient device to explain why Jesus isn’t visibly walking about today. Nor is the Ascension some end of the story, as though now He joins God the Father on the sideline and cheers on the Christians he left behind on the field of battle.

Rather, the Ascension is that action in God’s plan of salvation in which Christ, our Savior, who is also Christ, our brother,

now assumes the reign of Christ, our Lord and our King – with out ceasing to be our brother -- reigning from the right hand of the Father; that is, reigning from the place of divine power; reigning both in heaven AND on earth. With the Ascension, Christ is in the position that allows Him to be everywhere at the same time, with both His divine and His human natures. Thus, we rejoice over “The Blessing of the Ascension.”

II

The Ascension is great for you, because the Church receives this assurance concerning what Christ -- our brother, our Lord, and our King -- will actually do when He occupies the place of authority in heaven and on earth: “I send the promise of My Father upon you.” That does NOT happen at the Ascension. Instead, the Ascension brings the church to a preliminary posture, in light of Jesus’ preliminary word: “but stay in the city” of Jerusalem.

The Ascension puts you into the waiting mode. What, precisely, is this “promise of My Father”? Jesus answers: waiting “until you are clothed with power from on high.” That’s the promise of My Father, as Jesus puts it, it is the promise that you are to be clothed with power from on high.

But what is this word, “clothed”? What does it mean? If you listen to the way in which what we might call the hyper-enthusiastic Christians use this passage, you’d think that the the promise of Christ is that you be filled -- or in the KJV puts it, “endued” was a synonym for “imbued,” which means permeated, or filled through and through. Or, perhaps some might conclude Christ promises that you will

be “endowed,” which means to be gifted with abilities by another. These are the two ways that this passage is often treated among well-meaning Christians!

But Jesus does not promise you either to be “imbued,” nor to be “endowed.” The Greek term that Jesus uses is “endusysthe,” meaning to be covered, hence, the ESV term used tonight, “clothed.” St. Paul uses this same term to describe the condition that comes to all who are baptized: “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

What does this tell us? It tells us that this “promise of My Father,” as Jesus puts it, is to be clothed--that is to covered with--power from on high. The promise here is not about something that happens to your insides, to your emotions, or to you will; no, this is something that happens to your outsides, to your appearance. The power from on high is the forgiveness of sins that covers you to live the forgiven life.

That is the true promise of Pentecost, which follows the Ascension by 10 days, as its fruit and its purpose. What you celebrate in the Festival of the Ascension of your Lord is His preparatory moves from earth to heaven, and from one place at a time to every place at once, so that by the gift of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the Christian life of living in forgiveness, is bestowed upon believing sinners. It is the Spirit-led and Spirit-cultivated life in Christ, which, by faith, evidences that -- despite my many sins and failures -- I am indeed the child of God and the light to the world.

So, tonight it is well to thank God that Christ is ascended, for from that exalted spot He is closer to you than ever before. He is with you in this moment, and He is equally with our absent brethren. To be sure, as together you gather around His

Holy Word, be you many or few, or only two or three, Christ is present in this special way, according to His promise. He covers you, He clothes you with the covering of the power from on high, the power of the forgiveness of sins, so that the things He works within you come forth, however weakly or infrequently, to make you God’s lights in this world.

The blessing of the Feast of the Ascension is this: that Christ removes Himself from a here-and-there presence, in order that, on the day of Pentecost, He may reveal His universal, here-and-everywhere presence for and in His church. This Christ does through the Holy Spirit, so that you, too, in your daily life can be covered with the true and eternal power from on high.