

The Bishop's Message
MAY 2009

THE POWER OF THE ASCENSION

The best description of the Ascension of Jesus into heaven, the feast of which will be celebrated this year on Thursday, May 21st, is in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. A shorter and somewhat different version is found in the twenty-fourth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. A number of references to this extraordinary phenomenon are found throughout the New Testament.

In the Old Testament, we have what may be seen as a precedent for bodily ascension in Genesis (5:24), with the "translation" of Enoch from earth to heaven, and in Second Kings (2:1-14), with the "assumption" of Elijah into heaven.

Let's be clear that what St. Luke describes is not an act of levitation, but a theological truth which concludes Jesus' earthly ministry and is the prelude for the emergence of the Church and the Church's ministry at Pentecost. The Apostolic conviction is that the risen Christ has ascended as exalted Lord and King to His throne at the right hand of the Father. The Son who had become flesh in the mystery of the Incarnation returned to the Father in the mystery of the Ascension. The Ascension for St. Luke seems to be necessary in order for the Church to mature to the next phase of receiving the empowerment of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, this year to be celebrated on Sunday, May 31. The Ascension conveys pictorially the conviction that as Christ transcended this world we, too, are empowered to rise above the temporal by the Grace of God and live triumphantly even while continuing to be a part of it.

The Ascension affirms the victory of Easter for Christ and for us. The best ways of life are ascending ways. Knowledge is an ascent from ignorance. Goodness is an ascent from evil. Duty is an ascent from aimlessness. Love is an ascent from selfishness. Faith is an ascent from unbelief.

It has been said, "Faith is a higher faculty than reason," and the faithful know the spiritual is the higher side of life. This is the reality affirmed by the Ascension.

Ascension is not an escape from this world. On the contrary, it is an expression of God's provision for the redemption of the world. Jesus prays for the disciples "...whom (the Father) didst give (Him) out of the world" (Jn 17:6 NEB).

To be Christian is to be empowered in Christ by the Holy Spirit to live spiritually “above” the world while still being in it. We all are born physically into the world and we live in the world. However, followers of Jesus are empowered to live “above” the world and all of its temporal tumult.