

## THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

June 2, 2019

Acts 1:1–11 • Hebrews 9:24–28; 10:19–23 • Luke 24:46–53

### I.

On Friday, I accompanied the 8<sup>th</sup> graders at the parish school on their annual trip to Washington.

After a beautiful Mass in St. Matthew's Cathedral, we made our way to the National Mall, beginning at the Lincoln Memorial.

It struck me that the words of the Gettysburg Address, etched into the wall on one side of the Lincoln Memorial, are particularly fitting given today's feast of the Ascension of the Lord.

First, the context: the words were spoken at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, PA in 1863.

The president said that,

“We cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggle here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.”

Lincoln went on to say the following:

“It is for us the living... to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is... for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us... that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

## II.

The Ascension commemorates the entry of Jesus' risen and glorified body into heaven—that is, into the Trinity.

The Son of God never left the Trinity,  
but now his humanity was there.

In that way, Christ prepared a place for us in the Trinity;  
he opened heaven for us.

The Ascension is part of the singular work of Christ:  
the Paschal Mystery of his Death, Resurrection, and Ascension,  
together with the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost,  
which we will commemorate next Sunday.

The Second Reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews,  
explains that, because of the Ascension,  
the Sacrifice of Christ's Death and Resurrection is always before the Father:

“Christ did not enter into a sanctuary made by human hands,  
a copy of the true one,  
but heaven itself. ....  
through the blood of Jesus we have confidence of entrance  
into the sanctuary by the new and living way he opened for us  
through the veil, that is, his flesh.”

Christ did all of that for us.

However, Christ's work was unfinished, and it remains unfinished.

The Paschal Mystery is the pivotal and decisive event of salvation history,  
but the divine plan will only be complete when Christ returns in glory;  
that will be the Parousia or Second Coming.

Then we will receive our resurrected bodies,  
and our glorified humanity will join our souls in the Trinity.

So, Christ did something great  
—something we could never do—  
and nothing will ever be the same.

But there is work for us to do.

What Christ did awaits completion—  
but it is enough for us to do our work.

“It is... for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us...”

For President Lincoln,  
the sacrifice of soldiers who died at Gettysburg to preserve the Union  
was a moral imperative.

An imperative to justice: a new birth of freedom,  
and the further implementation of the principle  
that all men and women are created equal.

For us, the Sacrifice of Christ’s Death and Resurrection  
is not just a moral imperative.

Being eternal, in heaven,  
the Paschal Mystery is also a power at work in our lives.

Pope St. Leo the Great (ca. 400–461 A.D.) said that with the Ascension,  
“Our Lord’s visible presence has passed over into the sacraments.”

The Paschal Mystery, eternal before the Father,  
is accessible to us in the sacraments,  
especially Penance and the Eucharist.

The Sacrament of Penance brings about a renewal of the Paschal Mystery  
to forgive our sins, especially grave offenses.

And the Eucharist draws us into Christ’s Death and Resurrection  
so that we can make an offering of our entire lives to God.

These sacred rites matter.

They change our lives,  
and they give us strength to continue Christ’s work in the world,  
until he brings it to completion at his Second Coming.

That sacred work happens in many places: at home, at school, in the workplace.

And it happens in many ways: our treatment of others, the sharing of our faith, advocacy on behalf of the poor and needy.

The horrendous shootings in Virginia Beach on Friday, and the specter of violence that is becoming more common in American life, is a jarring reminder of how much work remains to be done.

But Christ has not abandoned us by ascending into heaven; rather, he is now present to all people for all time.

### **III.**

The trip to Washington ended with a visit to Arlington Cemetery.

There was an exhibit about how Americans honored the dead from World War I, since the centenary of the Great War was just last year (2018).

After World War I, the American people demanded dignified recognition of the war's dead.

This was the origin of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which was originally the resting place of a single American soldier who had died in World War I.

The war had ended; innumerable souls had given the ultimate sacrifice.

But there was still work to be done, including the task of rendering fitting homage to the dead.

Christ has won the decisive battle against evil and sin by his Death and Resurrection.

Jesus, crucified and raised, is now in heaven.

From there, his Sacrifice flows into the sacraments, which empower us to continue his work.