

May 26, 2020

The readings today give us the story of today's celebration from two different perspectives from two different gospel writers. Even though the first reading is not "technically" from one of the four gospels, it is written by Luke, who makes it very clear that what he tells us today is a direct continuation of his gospel story.

Luke, of course, gives us more details that Matthew does. And, in keeping with the name of his book, he focusses on the actions of the apostles (as well as on their thoughts and words). I've always found the image of the apostles staring off into the ether after Jesus has ascending as kind of comical image. I can easily envision them, before they have received the gifts of the Holy Spirit, kind of gob-smacked and dumbfounded. I picture them with their faces turned up, their mouths agape and their eyes sort of glazed over. With that image in my mind, I have no problem with how the "two men dressed in white"—angels, I suppose—admonish them: "Why are you standing there looking at the sky?" That line is a kind of preview of everything that follows in the book of Acts: Jesus has gone back to his Father, now it's time for his followers to get on with their job until he comes back again. It's almost as if they're being told: "Dudes, time to stop staring into space—There's important work to be done and you have to get on with it."

Matthew, on the other hand, focusses on Jesus' instructions to his disciples and his promise to be with them always. His instructions are simple and reflect the fact that they—we—are called to continue his own work in the world. He tells them to do three things:

1. Make disciples of all the nations: Bring all people they meet to experience the love of God embodied in Jesus and a faith relationship with him; regardless of their nationality, their

language, their religious background, their status in life, or any of the other things that human beings use to divide and separate those created in the image and likeness of the God of unconditional love.

2. Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Incorporate them through this sacramental act of into the new covenant and the community of God's people call the Christian church making them coheirs with you to the promises that the three persons in one God has made through Jesus of love and mercy in this life and eternal happiness in the next.
3. Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you: Show them by your words and actions what it means to be a follower of Jesus, showing his love in every circumstance of your life so that they can learn how to put Jesus' command of loving one another as He has loved us into effect in all their relationships with other human beings and with the world that God has entrusted to our care.

But along with the command, Jesus—in Mathew's version of the Ascension story—also makes a promise to be with them (with us) always. He is present in his word, in his sacraments and in the community that he gathers together as the church to support us in the here and now—as we prepare for his return in glory that was promised in Luke's version.

It's very clear in these readings that as followers of Jesus today we can't just gaze off into the distance and wait for Jesus to come back. There's work to be done and we have been called to do it—no matter how difficult, strange or uncertain the circumstances of the moment. Even today, in the midst of the pandemic and all the disruption it has caused in our lives, we—the disciples of Jesus—are challenged to bring our

eyes down to the world we live in, to the people we share this planet and community with, and to put our hearts, our hands and voices into living as Jesus did—loving and caring for one another in such a way that people experience God’s unconditional love for us; treating all human beings, no matter their external appearances, as beloved children of God; and showing them through our words and actions that Jesus, who ascended to heaven to prepare a place for us, is still with us in the community of his followers, to guide us and strengthen us.

Or maybe it better to paraphrase again and expand on the words of Luke’s “men in white”: “People of Saint Apollinaris, why are you standing there staring off into space? There’s work to be done and you’ve been called to do it. Get on with it—Now!”