

The Ascension of the Lord
Priority: Implementing Integral Ecology
(Acts 1:1 - 11, Psalm 46:2 – 3, 6 - 9, Eph 1:17 - 23, John 14:15-21)

Introduction

Consider for a moment the following question: why does the Church exist? We might rephrase the question and ask, what is the Church's mission? On this Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord, the Gospel reading provides us with an answer. Before ascending into heaven, Jesus says, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations." What is the Church's mission? To make disciples of Jesus. Recent Popes have continued to remind us of this central mission. Pope Paul VI said that the Church "exists in order to evangelize" (EN 14), and Pope Francis wrote that "in all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers" (EG 28). If the Church exists to make disciples, we must consider what is a disciple, and how do we make disciples? This is interconnected with the sixth apostolic priority: Implementing Integral Ecology.

Archbishop Mark writes:

Natural and human ecology interact in mysterious and unmistakable ways. To interfere with one is to interfere with the other; to promote the good of one is to promote the good of the other. *Fratelli Tutti* (a recent Papal Encyclical) focuses more upon human ecology in speaking of the radical interconnectedness of all human beings at a moment when alienation and polarisation are making disconnectedness seem the norm. The Church is called in such a moment to be a sign of contradiction, speaking in a way that rises above politics and economics so that a genuinely biblical and Christian voice can be heard.

1. What is a Disciple?

The first and second readings provide us insights into what it means to be a disciple. In the first reading we see that the disciples had a personal relationship with Jesus. They didn't just know him, they also followed him, and allowed him to transform their lives. This is a challenge to all of us. Do we have a personal relationship with Jesus? Do we follow Jesus? Do we allow Jesus to transform our lives?

In this same reading, Jesus promises a baptism with the Holy Spirit, a prophecy fulfilled at Pentecost. To be a disciple is to be filled with the Holy Spirit. This happens for each of us firstly in baptism, but then in confirmation, the sacrament which "perpetuates the grace of Pentecost" (Pope Paul VI) and empowers us for our mission. Beyond this, St Paul reminds us to, "be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph 5:18-19).

The second reading provides further insight into the work of the Spirit which enables us to see God, ourselves and the earth with a new vision. With hearts enlightened by the Spirit we are able to see the immeasurable greatness of God, the wonder and dignity of every person as being made in the image of God, and the beauty and majesty of the earth which shouts of the glory of God. Hearts enlightened by the Spirit "realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*" (Laudato Si, 49). It is the encounter with Jesus that inspires the love of God, each other and creation.

So how can we make more disciples?

2. How do we make disciples?

The Australian census data indicates that the fastest growing 'religion' in our Country is that cohort of people who identify as having 'no religion'. Given the decline of Christianity in the West, making disciples can be somewhat of a challenge! To help us see the way forward, it can be helpful to consider an analogy from nature.

What is the fruit of an apple tree? Typically we think of apples as the fruit of an apple tree, but if we think a little deeper, we find that it's not only apples, but *apple trees* that are the fruit of apple trees! If it were merely apples that were the fruit of apple trees, we'd only have ever had one apple tree and a very small number of apples! It is the fact that apple trees multiply that provides a multitude of apples. And here lies the wisdom of the apple tree...

What is the fruit of a disciple? We might immediately think of the fruits of the Spirit, various good works, charitable acts, but the fruit of the disciple is more disciples. When Jesus called his disciples, he said he'd make them fishers of people. In the Gospel today he calls his disciples to go and do just that – to make disciples! Each of us, all the baptised, are called and commissioned to make more disciples. This means sharing the joy of our encounter with Jesus with others. It means introducing others to Jesus and encouraging others to allow Jesus to begin to transform their lives. Making disciples means walking in the empowerment of the Spirit received in confirmation to courageously share our faith, hope and love with others. This is not about proselytizing. Jesus never coerced anyone to follow him. It is instead an invitation to others that begins with sharing the joy found in the enlightened heart that can see immeasurable greatness of God, the wonder of God's image upon every human person, and the fingerprints of God on all of creation.

Conclusion

Today our Lord calls each of us to go on mission, but let us first consider our own journey as a disciple of Jesus. Have we personally encountered Jesus, and have we allowed Jesus the freedom to move in our hearts and transform our lives? Are we walking in the grace of our baptism and the empowerment of the Spirit received in confirmation? Let us first ask Jesus to again lead us, guide us, and help us on our journey as his disciple.

Secondly let us consider the mission Jesus has given to us to make disciples of others. Who has God placed in your life whom you could share your faith with? Who might you begin to pray for? Who might you invite back to Mass?

Finally, in light of implementing integral ecology, let us pray that as we help others encounter Jesus, that the Spirit would enlighten hearts to see the interconnectedness of all of creation in order that a conversion to Christ leads also to an ecological conversion that transforms hearts and minds toward a greater love of God, each other and creation.