

Ascension Sunday

I have always been a big fan of Running (track and field). I grew up watching and participating in track and field. A beloved first cousin was a member of the National Track team and my sister (when she was in High School) ran in provincial races. One of my favourites is the Relay race. John and I had the dubious nature of being married on August 3, 1996. That date may not stick out to you but we know that our wedding happened in the mid Olympics held in Atlanta. There is actually video of the groomsmen gathering to get ready and not getting ready because they were glued to the screen watching Olympic Coverage. The night of our Wedding was the 4x 100 relay race final. Well, it was the next morning, in the honeymoon suite that John and I sat and watched the replay! We watched the 4x100 relay with Donovan Bailey, Robert Esmie, Glenroy Gilbert and Bruny Surin. So there we were, unsure of how the gold medal race had gone, watching with bated breath: how would they take the turns, who would pass on to whom, how smoothly would the baton be passed from one runner to the next, would the next runner be in step with the leg runner. [LET US WATCH THAT RACE][OR - But as history unfolded, the Canadians had proven victorious by running a perfectly run race.]

Today is the Sunday in which we celebrate/commemorate the feast of the Ascension. The actual time to celebrate the Ascension is 40 days after Easter and 10 days before Pentecost (which would have made it last Thursday) but to express the importance of the Ascension I prefer to transfer the commemoration to today. Because, otherwise the story and event gets lost to us. Throughout the Church Calendar year the Ascension is as important of a festival as Easter and Pentecost & All Saints & Holy Cross Day. When we don't acknowledge the Ascension there is something missing in our Easter season. We go from death, to resurrection to "he's gone again" and he left this spirit to guide us. It is important to acknowledge his Ascension. Important to acknowledge the period from when he left this earthly world to join a heavenly one. *We only give the celebration a passing glance.*

Actually, because of its utmost importance, some church communities will have a blessing of first fruits today, or would (during non pandemic times) process outside to commemorate his entry into heaven. In some church buildings there is a door above the altar and today they would take a figure representing the Christ and actually elevate it up through an opening in the roof to represent his ascension.

The Gospel reading today is from Luke's Gospel and it is a simple reading about Jesus preparing to leave his disciples. For the last 40 days, since the resurrection, he has been teaching and preparing for that time when he would no longer be with them. And in the start of today's gospel he is still doing the same thing. He is teaching about the prophets and the Law as he "opened their minds to scripture." He informs the disciples that all the events, and experiences they have encountered with him – when he has taught them, and what they have witnessed him doing -they will now do when they are clothed with the power from on high (which is what we will celebrate next week at the feast of the Pentecost). Then in our reading after teaching and ordaining them he leads them to Bethany where, as he is offering his blessing, is taken up into heaven. The disciples respond with worship and joy and return to Jerusalem.

I think the mention of Bethany is important. Bethany, if you recall, is the town of Martha and Mary and Lazarus. It is the place where Jesus brought his good friend up from the dead, the place where a community of believers found solace and it is the place where Jesus received his own healing and anointing when he was at Simon's home and the woman broke the alabaster jar of ointment and poured it over his head. The town of Bethany represents life, hospitality, and friendship. Those are the sort of images that are associated with the mere mention of the town. You know there are certain places that just mentioning a name conjures up images. For example, when someone says Memphis I think Elvis – well Bethany was a place (for that early fledgling Church) that conjured up images of refreshment. It is in Bethany, one of the only places in scripture where Jesus' full divinity (in the raising Lazarus) and his full humanity (the place where he weeps) is ever shown. I think Jesus chooses Bethany as a

reminder to his followers that even when he is gone, the gifts of Bethany are what his Kingdom are all about.

In Jesus' instruction to those disciples prior to Ascension, he passes to them the baton, the torch and says "now its your turn. My leg, my turn is over. I've set everything in motion for you. We have had 40 days of practicing handing over the baton. And now tag – you're it." And like any good relay race the hand over must be seamless. The apostles had to hit the ground running the pace Jesus leaves them. In his Ascension, Jesus leaves his followers to continue the race here on earth.

So the figurative baton now has been placed into your hands and into mine. And it has been placed into our hands by the faithful generations who have run this race before us. In a week there will be a fire lit underneath us. Just go back to our image of the relay race. We have to keep pace with those who handed it to us. We either run with the baton of mission or we let it fall to the ground and be disqualified.

And to run with the baton means to shine Christ's light on those who are the disenfranchised of our community – our shut-ins, new mom's, homeless students. It is to offer the gifts of Bethany: solace, healing, anointing, grace, hospitality and friendship. It is to be as St. Teresa of Avila suggests "the feet, hands and heart" of God in the world.

The feast of the Ascension is a reminder to us that Jesus loves us enough, has enough faith in us, to be his witnesses and carry off his mission in this world.

The race is ours. Let us not run this race in vain. Amen.