

I remind you that in this liturgical year, on almost every Sunday, we hear from St. Matthew's Gospel. I mentioned back on Palm Sunday, how St. Matthew's Gospel was written for Jews who had come to regard Jesus, a fellow Jew, as the fulfillment of their Jewish faith. And because of this, St. Matthew emphasizes much more the connections between Jesus and the great figures of the Jewish faith; on Jesus' teachings and how they serve as fulfillment of the Jewish Law.

One of the most common connections St. Matthew makes is between Moses and Jesus. Just as God revealed Himself on a mountain to Moses in the burning bush, so Jesus reveals himself on a mountain, in his transfigured glory; just as God gave the Law to Moses on a mountaintop, so Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was given on a mountaintop.

Today's Gospel calls to mind how Moses left this world. If you look at the final chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy, we read how Moses, at the very end of his life, went to the peak of Mt. Nebo, the very threshold, overlooking the Promised Land. There God gave him a vision of what was promised to the people of Israel. Shortly after, in that very spot, Moses died. Then, as the Tanakh translation—think of it as a Jewish English translation (JPS)—says it this way: "He buried him in the valley...", inferring that God Himself buried Moses. And it goes on to say that "*to this day no one knows the place of his burial*". This has raised the belief among some Jewish theologians, that Moses had been taken into heaven like Elijah. Today in the final chapter of his Gospel, St. Matthew tells us that Jesus was up on a mountain and was taken up into heaven.

But before he departed, Jesus declared what we have come to call *The Great Commission*, and he begins it by saying in no uncertain terms, "*All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me*". That's no trivial statement. We should understand that for the Jewish people, the Law of Moses was the place where power and authority resided. But St. Matthew makes it clear throughout his Gospel that Jesus is the fulfillment, the elevation, the perfection, of what Moses had initiated.

Then comes the 4-part commission itself: "*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*". Go...make disciples....baptize...teach....

And there are three things he makes clear. That God's paternal/maternal care, and thus salvation, is no longer narrowly for the Jews, but instead all nations, all people of the world. Second, he says that Baptism is now the means of entering into a covenantal relationship with God. No longer is it circumcision. Then third, Jesus says that his followers—the new Israel, those to whom he is making this declaration—are not to be passive in this role, but instead active as missionaries of this Good News<sup>1</sup>. *Go do it! You make it happen!*

In thinking about Jesus' Ascension into heaven, let's be clear: we don't narrowly believe that heaven is merely 'up'. I realize that in our limited comprehension of the universe and its arrangement, that's how we instinctively think of it. We would say heaven is not so much a specific location, but instead a new state of existence—and it's an upward way of existing. And so in this, as Jesus left from one way of existing to another, he offered these words as he left his disciples behind. The way our first reading says it, "*as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight*". I can only imagine the sadness they must have felt in seeing him go away from them, not to mention the sense of being overwhelmed by what he had just told them they must go and do, these simple fishermen. In their sadness, wondering what they'd gotten themselves into, and perhaps wondering if there was any way to get out of this impossible task.

But we also think of the Ascension as the point at which Jesus came to exist for the world in a new way, a next phase: through his followers themselves, who would be strengthened and guided by the Paraclete, the Advocate, the Holy Spirit—soon to poured into them.

And so for any way that his departure left his followers both saddened and feeling suddenly unsupported, let's consider what is stated in our Creed, written in the early centuries of Christianity: "*Et*

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<sup>1</sup> *Have You Heard The Good News? Reflections on the Sunday Gospels, Cycle A*; Edward T. Dowling SJ

*ascendit in caelum, sedet ad dexteram Patris*—that is, “He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father”. In ancient times, to sit at the right hand of someone meant you had the other person’s ear, and therefore some influence upon that person, whether it was a king, a queen, a high-ranking dignitary. Those who sat at the right of the king, had access, and thus the greatest opportunity to sway the king<sup>2</sup>. The words of the Creed are meant to remind us that he actively intercedes for us, the universal Church. As our intercessor, our supreme mediator, He loves us and leads us in a new way.

But in whatever way it still seems like he is merely ‘away’ from us, somewhere else, let us bear in mind the words that follow his Great Commission: “*I am with you always, until the end of the age.*” It is St. Matthew, who at the beginning of his Gospel, reminded us that the baby Jesus was to be called *Emmanuel*—that is, *God with us*. And so he ends his Gospel, reminding us of this promise<sup>3</sup>. In the Holy Spirit, and as the head of this Church, of which we comprise the body, he remains alive and imminent, especially in the proclaimed Scriptures, and in the Sacraments.

But he is also imminently present in the work we do in response to his Great Commission: “*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*”

If you want him to be close and to be able to be alive in you, guiding you, live like a disciple. *So, what’s your discipleship resume look like as of late?* Aside from being here right now, what are you doing to help you to know how to be a stronger disciple, or to understand in the first place, what it really means? But also, who around you is coming to know Jesus because of you? That Great Commission was given to you and to me as well. And I don’t think Jesus meant, “*Go do it, if you have nothing better to do, when things slow down...or after all your kids are grown up and out of the house*” This parish has resources to help us, but you’ve got to let me know how you need help, and maybe need to reprioritize a few things. To the extent that you and I are willing to go out, to move forward, it is going to move us—and at least some of the souls around us—upward, toward our a new way of living.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*