

Acts 1:1–11
 Psalm 47:2–3, 6–9
 Ephesians 1:17–23
 Luke 24:46–53

Homily for Ascension Sunday

The Stanley Cup Playoffs! I will admit it. I am a true Canadian sports fan and never tire of watching the skilled players of the NHL compete for what I think is the most beautiful trophy in all of professional sport, the Stanley Cup. What makes hockey at this time of the year so exciting is that with the first round of the playoffs there are sixteen teams that have a common goal, to win Lord Stanley's trophy, and they have a common purpose, to play intentionally every game in all three zones, defence, neutral and offence. That team which has played three zone hockey most effectively will then hoist the thirty plus pound trophy when the final buzzer sounds because the victorious team has won 16 games in four rounds of the playoffs. While they will be bruised and tattered the winning team will be exuberant as well because of what they have gained.

I want to suggest to you that the Ascension of our Lord is to our Catholic Faith what the playoffs are to hockey. Because of the Ascension of Jesus we have clarified for us our common goal and we have defined more clearly our common purpose.

Our Common Goal is that we will come to share fully in the divinity of Christ because he chose to humble himself and so share in our humanity. It is this wonderful truth that the priest affirms at every Mass with the mingling of the wine and water. As the water is added, he prays quietly:

By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.

St. Irenaeus said something similar in the second century. He put it like this:

“Jesus took on our humanity in order to give us His divinity”.

The common goal we will one day share is the fullness of heaven. We will in the end, which in turn will be our eternal beginning, be Saints. Of this wonderful fact St Paul writes in Ephesians when he prays these words for those who first received the letter and those of us listening two millennia later:

17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,

The Ascension of the Lord announces to us that we have a solid and lasting hope, the glorious inheritance in the saints, heaven itself, which is our common goal. But notice this; with our goal in mind because the eyes of our heart have been enlightened, we are given focus so that in the present we can live out our common purpose. You will notice in the passage from Acts the angels admonish the disciples. Listen to St Luke's recounting:

And when Jesus had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Here is the point; the Church is not to spend her time heaven gazing. Rather, knowing our goal, which is heaven, our gaze, as the Church is to look outwards to the world. Such a focus will give us the common goal so clearly articulated in both the Acts of the Apostles and The Gospel. Both were from the hand of one author, St. Luke.

Here is our common goal according to the Acts of the Apostles. Quoting Jesus, St Luke writes:

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

Then in the Gospel, our common goal is given even greater clarity when Jesus says to the Apostles:

Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead,⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

The Common Goal of the Church is to witness to Jesus as we proclaim to all nations the invitation to turn to Christ and so come to know the infinite mercy of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

What does such a common goal look like for us as 21st Century Catholics? Back in March of 2014 Pope Francis sent a letter to the Bishops of Argentina who were meeting to further implement the work the Latin American Bishops had begun in 2007 to foster the New Evangelization. The key theme of that 2007 meeting was "To go into the deep", taken from the Gospel of Luke where Jesus directs Peter to go into the deep waters for a catch. Picking up on this image Pope Francis writes:

I express to you a desire that we will be a Church that will "Go into the Deep." May the whole of ministry be in a missionary key. We must come out of ourselves to all the existential peripheries and grow in boldness.

A Church that does not go out, sooner or later gets sick and closed in on herself. It is true also that to be a Church that goes out something can happen, as it can to any person who goes out to the street: to have an accident. Given this alternative, I wish to say to you frankly that I prefer a thousand times an injured Church than a sick Church. The typical illness of the shut-in Church is self-reference; to look at herself, to be bent over herself like the woman in the Gospel. It is a kind of narcissism that leads us to spiritual worldliness and to sophisticated clericalism, and then it impedes our experiencing “the sweet and comforting joy of evangelizing.”

I wish all of you this joy, which so many times is united to the Cross, but which saves us from resentment, sadness and clerical [solitude]. This joy helps us to be each day more fruitful, spending ourselves and unraveling ourselves in the service of the holy faithful people of God. This joy will grow increasingly to the degree that we take seriously the pastoral conversion that the Church asks of us.

To capture the Pope’s vision and to heed his call is to be the Church choosing to be faithful to the Common Purpose the Lord entrusted to his body in advance of his ascension into heaven.

St. Peter’s is a community that has a clear understanding of our common goal and so our common purpose is clearly being embodied in our corporate life. May we be inspired by the Feast of the Ascension of become ever more committed to this common purpose to bring Jesus to those who are without hope and without God.

We are a mission minded community that is being called to by Jesus to go out ever further into the deep so that others can come to know with us a hope and joy far greater than any sporting trophy, even the Stanley Cup. It is the joy of knowing “the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints”..... It is the joy of our common goal, heaven and all heaven’s glories.