

The Ascension of the Lord, May 28, 2017 Lectionary: 58

Focus: Baptism transforms us into Christian disciples as children of God.

Function: Welcome the newly-baptized into our faith community.

It's likely that everyone here has either seen or personally experienced the fascination a child has with caterpillars or butterflies. We know that those grimy little caterpillars that tickled our skin while crawling on our arms turned into butterflies with beautiful wings that we would catch with nets. This process of metamorphosis gives those unattractive little caterpillars new beauty, and the freedom to gracefully flit around and fly. This change transforms their very nature. Reflecting on today's celebration of the Solemnity of the Ascension of Jesus, this image of a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly takes on deeper meaning when viewed through the lens of a Christian perspective.

Jesus, on Easter Sunday, conquered death with his Resurrection, and spent the next 40 days before he ascended into heaven, strengthening his disciples for the mission he was about to give them. There are two aspects important to mention about the Ascension. First is stated well by St. Leo the Great, who in the fifth century was Pope Leo I, one of the more highly-regarded pontiffs of the Catholic Church, and one of the 36 Doctors of the Church. He wrote this about the Ascension:

“With all due solemnity we are commemorating that day on which our poor human nature was carried up, in Christ, above all the hosts of Heaven, above all the rights of the angels, beyond the highest heavenly powers to the very throne of God the Father”.

And so carrying our humanity with him, Jesus ascends to the right hand of God. And the second aspect of the Ascension relates to the beginning of the mission for His disciples — defined by the Great Commission, the instructions Jesus gave immediately before he ascended into heaven.

The Great Commission from today's Gospel has three elements - evangelize (Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations), sacramentalize (baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit), and catechize (teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you). This was a tall order for the disciples, who were with Jesus, yet even today, this is what we are called to do. Imagine how the disciples felt as they watched Jesus ascend - bewildered, confused, disoriented, left wondering what is next. I suspect they had a sense of loss and a lot of unanswered questions, trying to understand the meaning of the events that had unfolded over the last 40 days or more. As portrayed in today's first reading from Acts, we see two men dressed in white say to the disciples: *“Why look at the sky?”* I think these angels are telling the disciples *“now the ball's in your court!”*: make disciples, baptize, and teach.

But not so fast! This Great Commission is a tough job, so they're instructed to wait for the Holy Spirit, prefiguring Pentecost, where through Baptism in the Holy Spirit they will be given wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of God. Like the caterpillar, they will be transformed into something much more beautiful and capable!

Jesus ascends, and gives the disciples the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the Advocate, the one who will be with them always, who will transform them, imbue them with the power to witness for Jesus and take his gospel message to the corners of the world - to fulfill the Great Commission. The coming of the Spirit conquered their fear, so they are now equipped to begin their public ministry - to go make disciples, baptize, teach. You see, their faith was increased with the Lord's Ascension, and strengthened by the gift of the Spirit. They were transformed by Baptism in the Spirit! And this coming of the Spirit is a message of profound importance; in the Acts of the Apostles, it is mentioned nearly 80 times. And it is through Baptism that the power of the Holy Spirit is conferred upon the believers to transform them.

Baptism is the beautiful sacrament of transformation whereby the believer accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and begins their spiritual journey in earnest, a journey that, like the caterpillar changing into the butterfly, transforms one's life, leading ultimately to eternal salvation with God in heaven.

At Baptism, we receive two gifts: first, forgiveness of sins, and second, a new birth in the Holy Spirit as adopted children in God's Christian family. The seven sacraments we can receive as Catholics are essential to our spiritual life because they give us access to God's graces, and Baptism is so important because as the first sacrament we receive, it opens the door to allow the font of God's graces to flow to us through the other six sacraments. This is why Baptism is called the gateway sacrament. And here, with the Great Commission, we see Jesus instilling this sacrament 2000 years ago, the same sacrament that little Elliott Gerald Rudemiller will receive today.

Baptism is the most important thing a parent can do for their child, and Logan and Erica, as parents, are presenting Elliott to God to receive the Baptismal gifts, to strengthen him on his faith journey in life, to give him a firm foundation from which he can be formed in his Catholic faith to attain the final prize that we all pursue - eternity with God in Heaven. Christian discipleship is a total way of life, a commitment to pattern our daily actions and decisions after the example set by Jesus and his most heroic followers. Discipleship begins with a sacramental initiation with baptizing all new followers of Jesus in the Trinitarian formula. The old Chinese proverb states that the longest journey begins with a single step. And today, Elliott's lifelong journey towards salvation as a Christian disciple begins with his single step of Baptism.

Fr. Richard Veras wrote in the Magnificat prayer guide a lovely reflection of what parents might be thinking when having their child baptized. I share this with you now:
"I cannot be with you always. I cannot promise the happiness for you that I so desire. However, Jesus Christ can. I desire that you be made a member of his Body, as I am, so that in him we can walk toward the fullness of life together, through good and through bad, even when we are apart, because we will be united in Him."

What a loving and giving sentiment that a parent expresses to their child as they, like the grimy caterpillar turning into the beautiful butterfly, begin the transformation in spiritual life as a child and disciple of God.

So here on the Ascension of Jesus, as we, the Catholic community of Queen of Apostles, renew our Baptismal vows just moments from now, let us unite our voices with Erica and Logan, and welcome Elliott as the newest Catholic in the family of God.