

Ascension of our lord, May 18, 2023

Text: Psalm 47

The six weeks of Lent called for our contrite hearts to repent and recognize our inability to fight and win against the evil foe. The celebration of Easter declares that the battle against Satan was fought for us by Jesus, and he takes the scepter of victory. Ascension is the capstone of Jesus' victory. God the Father has crowned him with glory and honor. He has given him dominion over the works of his hands; he has put all things under his feet. Christ takes his rightful seat of glory, honor, and rule for the Church. That then leads the Church into the season of Pentecost, where Jesus' rule is exercised in his gracious gifts of Word and Sacrament.

In 1967, The 5th Dimension wrote and produced a song with the lyrics, "Up, up and away in my beautiful, my beautiful balloon." It was a smash hit and very popular all around the world. The melody was written with the purpose of the hearer imagining what rising above all troubles and problems would be like.

As inviting as that thought is, our Ascension Day celebration affords us more than an imagination of rising above. It gives an actual gift that raises us to heavenly heights. It's the real history recorded in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts informing us that forty days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead, he gathered his apostles and from their midst ascended into heaven. There he took possession of and occupancy of the throne of glory given to the victor over evil.

Psalm 47 is a very fitting scriptural song pointing to this wonderful event, especially the words, ***“God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet”*** (v 5). Jesus ascending to His throne of honor shouts out that He has won the victory.

The psalm first shouted out a marvelous victory God had given his Old Testament people. In 850 BC, Jerusalem was under attack by two nations, two earthly kings, the Moabites and Ammonites. Both were relatives of Israel, descended from Lot, Abraham's nephew. Because they were relatives, Israel had spared both of them as they approached the Promised Land centuries before. But both were also pagan, even practicing child sacrifice.

The Lord God came to his people's rescue. King Jehoshaphat of Judah knew that his army was outnumbered. He cried out to the Lord, ***"We are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you"*** (2 Chronicles 20:12). God sent a prophet who replied, ***"The battle is not yours but God's"*** (20:15). So, Judah went out doing nothing more than singing and praising ***"with a very loud voice"*** (20:19). That's it. And God threw the enemies into a confused rage. They attacked one another until no man was left to bother Jerusalem.

Psalm 47 recounts this event in which a King above all kings was needed to save God's people: ***"Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy!"*** (v 1). The resultant victory led King Jehoshaphat to proclaim that the Lord had come to be with his people to save them. The Lord came down and then ascended back on high with victory in hand. The psalm proclaims the Lord God Almighty, the Lord of heaven and earth, to be King of kings and deserving of praise and honor from all creation: ***"God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne"*** (v 8).

Jesus came down from his throne of honor because we needed a King to fight our battles against demons, the armies of the world, and the evil one. These enemies constantly gather forces to lead us astray and threaten us. Satan and this evil world lure us to worship false gods: Our own good works that we might trust as meritorious. Uses of our bodies meant only to be between husband and wife, corrupted with others. Possessions of earthly value ranked as more important than the work of the church.

Meanwhile, enemies of faith and the church press harder and harder against us. Limiting free practice of our religion to just freedom of what we do inside these walls. Trying to force us to cooperate with sexual perversion and destruction of marriage. Calling us anti-women when we're really being pro-children. We have far less power to defeat these enemies than Jehoshaphat had against Moab and Ammon. We are by nature blind, dead, enemies of God. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We are sinners from the time our mothers conceived us. Our only cry is, "We have no power to face this vast army attacking us, but our eyes are on you, O Lord! We are helpless! We repent!"

So, Jesus did come down from his throne in heaven to fight our battles for us. He resisted all temptations to satisfy his flesh, to worship anyone apart from his Father, to glorify himself by avoiding the cross. He willingly followed through on the plan of salvation with a fierce battle. He was arrested for a crime he did not commit. He was beaten and cursed before the public. He was crucified on the cross of Calvary. He took upon himself the iniquity of us all to make atonement for us before his Father.

But now Jesus' ascension back to his throne of honor shouts out that he has defeated those enemies: ***“God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet”*** (v 5). His victory was displayed as a result of his death. The grave could not hold him down. In his resurrected body, he is glorified by the Father so that he will never again suffer. Jesus stopped the accusing mouth of Satan and destroyed his power. He ascended to heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. ***“Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy! . . . God sits on his holy throne”*** (vs 1, 8).

This is Jesus' seat of authority, his throne of glory. This is a seat of power and might from which Jesus rules all things for us. This is a seat never to be occupied by anyone but the one who defeated sin, death, and devil. Jesus rules his Church with abundant gifts from heaven given to us on earth.

The Gospel bespeaks the fact that God is not against us but for us in Christ Jesus. In Baptism, he brings the victory of his blood to the water and washes us clean. He defends us against all accusations and relieves our consciences by absolving us from all sin. In the Holy Supper, he joins his life-giving body and redemptive blood to us for the forgiveness of sin, strengthening our faith, and granting the certainty of life everlasting with him.

How wonderful it is that we need not try to imagine what being lifted above all struggle and challenge would be like. No need for a "beautiful, beautiful balloon." We have Christ Jesus ascended and sitting on the holy throne. He has all power and authority and exercises it for our sake with gifts of divine mercy and grace. All praise and honor are truly his! Amen