

WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Jn. 17:20-26. (R1) Acts 7:55-60. (R2) Rev. 22:12-14, 16-17, 20.

I do hope when people read this column they always have the Scripture readings listed at the head of the column open before them. Otherwise this column could be opaque.

The second reading is from the Book of Revelation. As I meditated on this reading while sitting in Church one day, I began to pick it apart line by line.

John heard a voice speak to him. It said, "Remember." The sin of the angels was pride. The sin of man is forgetfulness. Hence the injunction, "Remember."

Remember what? That life is short. "I am coming soon." There are three comings of the Lord. Two are visible: His first coming in history and His last coming in judgment. One is invisible: His coming to dwell in the hearts of men especially through the sacraments.

His last coming is to reward "each man as his conduct deserves." For He is the Alpha and the Omega, the A to Z, the First and the Last.

The reward to those who have cleansed their hearts ("washed their robes") is to be able to eat of the tree of life. No longer will the cherubim hinder them once these have passed through the flaming sword of death.

We can accept all this as fact. We have Jesus' word for it. He is the Root and Offspring of David; that is, David's Lord and yet his Son.

So the Spirit-filled Church, His Bride, invites all to come and be baptized. "Come...accept the gift of life-giving water... for I am coming soon!"

The first and third readings are prayers. Stephen prays for sinners; Jesus prays for all who have come to the life-giving water. He prays for unity. For Jesus unity must have been pretty important for He uttered this prayer, like Stephen's, before He died. Not once did He say it, but four times, in rapid succession.

There are three kinds of unity: institutional, doctrinal, and fraternal.

Institutional unity is one Church, one fold, one Shepherd. The Ecumenical Movement aims at this kind of unity. It is yet to come and to be prayed for.

Doctrinal unity is oneness in faith and worship. It should exist within the one true Church.

Fraternal unity is a oneness in love—"as you,

Father are one in me and I in you." Wow! what a model for unity! It was for this that Jesus prayed!

In the wake of Vatican II, freedom of reflection and expression has been offered God's people. Like all freedom given to those who had been traditionally passive, it can go to one's head, like mind-befuddling wine. Sometimes such freedom can unleash extremism or hostility.

Sooner or later, somebody is going to ask, "How far can we go?" To impose any limits is a red rag to the bullish extremist. He has no patience with, nor trust in any restrictions. Freedom degenerates into doing anything one wants, regardless.

At the other end of the spectrum is hostility. One of the anomalies of this age, which speaks of love so vociferously, is that so much hostility seems to prevail everywhere. In some primitive dialects, there are no words to describe one who disagrees. The only term available is "enemy." We all defend freedom vehemently. Yet when it is exercised and an opinion is proffered that does not coincide with one's own, then one is disappointed, dismayed, and disturbed.

For instance, I do not believe in the ordination of women to the sacramental priesthood. I may be wrong. But my position (like Rome's) is based on solid theological and scriptural reasons. Am I therefore a bete noir, a wicked enemy of women's rights and equality? Or am I only dense, a square? Yet I, and many others, would like to be heard without resentment—heard; but not as if we were backward children or an imminent menace to all that is good and true.

It was for this unity that both Stephen and Jesus prayed: one to forgive those who are hostile and the other to be at one with those with whom we are at odds.

Insights in Liturgy

Ascension Day: Sometimes Overshadowed

By FATHER ROBERT J. KENNEDY

The feast of the Ascension is a day caught in the middle. Framed, and to some extent overshadowed, by the greater feasts of Easter and Pentecost, this holy day nevertheless remains an integral part of the celebration of the Easter mysteries.

When the liturgical calendar was revised in 1969, the Church tried to bring the Easter season into conformity with its original purpose. The Instruction on the Roman Calendar states that "the fifty days from Easter Sunday to Pentecost are celebrated as one feast day, sometimes called the 'Great Sunday.'" This was to restore the understanding of Easter-Ascension-Pentecost as different aspects of a single saving event. This respects the New Testament understanding of the saving work of Christ in which, along with the early liturgy, Ascension Day was not considered a historical commemoration.

Rather, it was an integral part of the Easter Event: God raised Jesus and exalted him at his right hand, as Paul consistently teaches. Even though Luke especially seems to spell out a historical sequence for the saving events of Christ's life, all the New Testament writers are consistent in seeing these events as a single movement of rising from the dead, exaltation with the Father, and the giving of the Spirit.

The liturgy extends this "one feast day" over fifty days so that we might contemplate the depth of our salvation in Christ. In accepting the sacrifice of the love of Christ on the cross, the Father raises him from the dead and enthrones Him as Lord of the Universe. The victor forever in battle with sin and death, Christ is glorified and

exalted as the right hand of the Father. The Ascension of the Lord, then, is not a departure from us like a rocket ship or the rise of a helium balloon; it is His climbing the steps to take His seat beside the Father so that together they might come and make their dwelling with us (Jn 14:23). The Ascension gives us cause for unrestrained rejoicing, because the risen Lord will be present with us forever in the gift of His Spirit.

And so, Ascension Preface I proclaims the risen-and-ascended Lord as the king of glory, the conqueror of sin and death, the mediator between God and man, the judge of the world, the Lord of all, our hope, the beginning and head of the Church. Even this list fails to exhaust the depth of the saving acts of Christ, but it clearly reveals the Ascension as the bridge between the Resurrection and the Gift of the Spirit.

But what is the practical significance of the Ascension for us? First of all, the exaltation of Christ means that our own human nature, which He embraced, is exalted. A whole new world of possibility is opened up for us; it is possible for us to be a new creation. Christ "was taken up to heaven...to claim for us a share in His divine life." (Ascension Preface III) We "rise with him to the joys of

heaven" (Prayer over the Gifts). By His reunion with the Father, we can touch the divine life, even now, a touch which leads us to the eternal life of heaven (see Prayer after Communion).

In this we find the second practical significance of the Ascension: the hope of our future glory. We, too, must

be lifted up; and so the Apostles gazing toward heaven is an appropriate symbol for the Church. The mark of the Christian is that each one's eyes are fixed on the future. We long for the fullness of days when God's Kingdom will come, when the new creation will be held forth in all its splendor.

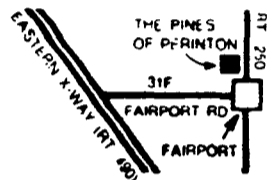
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