

9. May 2024

Feast of the Ascension of the Lord
You will be my witnesses

Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit." So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. 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." And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 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."

In the eastern part of Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives, there is a small chapel. It is in Muslim hands, so only one day a year, on the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord, liturgies are allowed to be held here. Inside the chapel is a stone with a footprint, which according to tradition is the last footprint Jesus made on earth before ascending to heaven. Near the site is an Orthodox church and monastery also dedicated to the Ascension.

Very close to the site of the Ascension is the church of 'Pater Noster', run by a community of Carmelites. This is the place where the Lord taught His disciples the Lord's Prayer (cf. Lk 11:1-4), and it is also the place where He spoke to them about the end times in the so-called 'Apocalyptic Discourse' (cf. Mt 24:3-51).

When we visit these places (in my case they are very familiar to me, after many stays in Jerusalem), the events that took place there can become very present to us. It is as if one could hear Jesus speaking to the disciples, instructing them about what was to happen in the history of salvation. Although He did not tell them the day or the hour when the kingdom of God would be re-established (cf. Mt 24:36), He gave them clear instructions on what they were to do so that this kingdom would be extended. In the power of the Holy Spirit they would be His witnesses *"in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth"*.

This is essential and sufficient information for the apostles! Speculating about when the end times will be does not help; on the contrary, it distracts from the mission given. Certainly, the Lord invites us to discern the signs of the times, to interpret them and to give the right response. But the best response will always be to fulfil the mission of proclaiming the Gospel and giving authentic witness, with all the more fervour as the Second Coming of Christ draws closer.

Today's reading tells us that the event of the Ascension took place before the eyes of the disciples, moments after the Lord had once again confirmed them in their mission. Like the Resurrection, the Ascension is a real and historical event and not merely symbolic, as some theologians claim. The disciples were called to witness and bear testimony to this event. Indeed, to this day it is part of the Creed of the Church. The Resurrection, unlike the Ascension, took place without eyewitnesses, but the Risen One then appeared to a chosen few. The Ascension, on the other hand, was seen by the disciples with their own eyes. Moreover, there were two heavenly witnesses, the angels, who confirmed the truth of the event and reminded the disciples that the Lord would return just as they had seen Him go.

We, the faithful, receive an important message in the Ascension of the Lord, which is the return of Jesus to the Father. All that Jesus foretold will be fulfilled! Heaven is His home and our home, the dwelling place He prepares for us where our heavenly Father is. So we can live in faith and hope that everything will be ready when the hour of our death comes.

The announcement of the Lord's return, confirmed by the angels, can also inspire us to strive for the greatest possible fruitfulness in the short time of our earthly life. Just like

our life, history is coming to an end, and this end will be completely bathed in the light of God. The devil will be thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone (cf. Rev 20:10), and the redeemed will sing the song of the Lamb (cf. Rev 15:3).

The Lord wants to show us all this, and He seems to say to us: "Make haste, for the time is near! Do not lose any more time! There are still many who long to know me. You do not need to know the time or the hour; just be my witnesses in the power of the Holy Spirit.