

*Dear Friends,*

Today, with the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord, we mark Jesus' physical separation from his apostles. Yet as he departs, he says to them, "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20). If he has departed, how can he still be with them, be with us? Our Gospel answers that question.

Matthew places Christ's only post-resurrection appearance to the Eleven on a mountain in Galilee. A mountaintop is a traditional site for closeness to God. The prime example in Matthew's Gospel is the Sermon on the Mount. It was also on a mountaintop that Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus at his transfiguration. Now, on the mountain of Jesus' ascension, the disciples recognize him and worship him as a sign of their acceptance of him.

Addressing the eleven, Jesus explains how he is and always will be present to them. "All power in heaven and earth has been given to me," he says. What was once the sole honor of the God of Israel, has now been given to Jesus. Jesus is claiming to be the presence of the living God, and because we know this to be true, he is able to declare three commands that will guarantee that he will be with us until the end of time.

First, he breaks through the limitations of people and says, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (v. 19a). No longer are God's people just the people of Israel. He continues with the instruction "[baptize] them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (v. 19b). With these words, he is directing his apostles on a new rite of initiation for his people. Once only men could be initiated into the chosen people through circumcision, now all people have the possibility to live as the Lord's chosen through baptism.

Last, but not least, Jesus adds to the Law of Israel, instructing the Eleven to "[teach] them to observe all that I have commanded you" (v. 20a). Under the old covenant God's chosen people had to observe the commandments of Moses, now this new people will be formed not just on the Law of Moses, but also on the basis of the teachings and commands of Jesus.

Though Jesus has ascended back to the Father, he is still among us. He is present among us in a Church that opens its doors to all nations and peoples, bringing them life through the waters of baptism and instructing them in his ways and by his words. The challenge for each of us is to continue doing as Jesus commands, to become missionaries, missionary disciples of Christ to our world.

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* - the Joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis wrote: "Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are 'disciples' and 'missionaries,' but rather that we are always 'missionary disciples.'" May we embrace the challenge of the Gospel, consciously making Christ present to all.

Peace and blessings,

*Father John*