

Homily for Ascension, 2020

Ephesians 1:20-23

'A full church with empty buildings'

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TEXT

²⁰God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²²And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

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INTRODUCTION

Ascension Day, 2020, here at Bethlehem, is a very strange one, just as Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday 2020 have been,

because of course on these great festivals of the Christian Church, in the year, we have not been able to gather for public worship -
- due to the coronavirus COVID-19 restrictions.

We're here again tonight as we have been on these other festival days, looking into a camera lens for this live-streamed online service, in a relatively empty church building.

Let me tell you, even after these couple of months now, it continues to be quite a strange experience.

It's for this reason I think, that a particular verse in our reading from Ephesians stimulated my imagination this week.

when the Apostle Paul says of Christ Jesus that he is head over all things for the church, *'which is his body, the **fullness** of him who **fills** all in all'*.

Dear friends, this Ascension Day I proclaim to you the good news,

that although our buildings are empty, the Church is full.

The Church is **always** full,
full of blessing,
full of grace,
full of life,
full of the presence of Christ Jesus.

We are a full church,
just with *temporarily* empty buildings.

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BUT ON ASCENSION?

Now granted,
this could seem a counter-intuitive message on the feast of the Ascension of our Lord,

because to many people,
as they hear the account of Jesus **withdrawing** from his disciples,
it can sound as if Jesus **is** removing his presence from them entirely.

Sometimes we get the mistaken idea about the Ascension that the Church loses something here,
that we end up with less Christ,
with a **lack**,
we end up a little emptier.

Yet notice again that the promise is exactly the opposite.

It's exactly at this point when the Apostle Paul has said that God raised Jesus *'from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places'*...

That he goes on to speak of,

The church, *'which is his body, the **fullness** of him who **fills** all in all'*.

The Ascension of Jesus Christ does not mean his absence,
but his presence in a new way.

The Ascension of Jesus Christ does not mean less of him,
but more of him!

The Ascension of Jesus does not leave an emptiness,
but a **fullness**.

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Now how this is so,
Is something of a mystery,
Although thinking more deeply about spiritual reality as it's revealed to us in the Scriptures can help.

Let me try a little analogy for you that that could give us just a little window into this mystery.

Imagine a laboratory somewhere developed a vaccine for a life-threatening illness.

Imagine, for the sake of argument,
That this vaccine would work only if a person took it in,
through their drinking water.

With the vaccine, The laboratory could do several things...

They could invite people to come to where they were,
Each bringing their own glass of water to access this cure.

Or the vaccine could be distributed to households,
where people mix it in their water at home.

Or,
They could go to the reservoirs,
To the sources of people's drinking water.

They could mix the vaccine into the water supply itself,

And now the "presence of the vaccine" would "fill" the whole region.

As I read the accounts of Jesus ascension and the promises of his presence and fullness,
And how closely this is connected with his sending of the Spirit who says will be like a river of living
water,

It seems to me my water supply illustration could just give a little window into this great mystery.

That in his Ascension to heaven,

Jesus returns to the source of life itself,
And so can now fill all things.

He ascends not to remove himself from us,

but to **fill** the Church with his presence.

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WHY GOOD NEWS?

Now,
One of the reasons this is good news,

Is that beyond issues of temporarily empty buildings due to COVID-19 restrictions,

We in the church often experience a sense of emptiness in one way or another.

We know for example,
That even when we can gather again for public worship,
we may not be packed to the rafters like we hope,

Many places of Christian worship felt a bit empty long before COVID-19.

Or we feel this sense of emptiness and want and lack in other ways.

A lack of young people,
a lack of money,
a lack resources,

a lack of peace and harmony in the church,
a lack of credibility and status in our society,
a lack of spiritual vitality and energy.

And if it's not corporately,

for many people,
you sense this emptiness personally,
in one way or another.

And so to all this emptiness,
the Ascension comes with it's message of the fullness of Christ Jesus in his church.

We are reminded that what we need as God's people is never supplied by us,

on our own we do lack,
on our own we would be empty,

but God fills us up,
Christ Jesus by the power of his Spirit fills his body the Church.

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Although, there's another important vantage point to view this from and ask one further question.

Which is to ask,
is this necessarily a fullness of presence that is for our good?

After all,
surely you've been in a family, or a workplace,
or some other community,

where the presence of one particular figure seemed to fill that place,

but in a **negative** way.

Where that figure's pervasive presence in a place made everyone miserable, and seemed to bring only hurt and destruction.

So how do we know the fullness of Christ is good news?

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GRACE UPON GRACE

Well,
because the one who ascends to the Father's right hand,

does so with *'wounds still visible above,
in beauty glorified.'*

The ascended Christ who sits at the Father's right hand of power,
and whose body the church is his fullness,
and who fills all in all,

he is the Christ who suffered and died for your sins and mine,
who gave his life as the ultimate sacrifice and then rose again victorious over death,

who ascends to the Father's right hands with the scars in his hands,
and the wound in his side,

and who even now intercedes for us.

The church - his body - is his fullness,

and what sort of fullness is this?

Not a fullness of hurt, or destruction or condemnation,

but in the words of John's Gospel,
*'from his **fullness** we have all received **grace** upon **grace**.'* (John 1:16)

A fullness of **grace**,
is the fullness with which Christ fills his church.

We read later in Ephesians,
*'I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the **love** of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be **filled** with all the **fullness** of God.'* (Eph 3:18-19)

It's as we come to know more deeply this **love** of Christ,
that we are filled with all the fullness of God.

The Church may at times feel empty in one way or another,
and in each of our Christian lives we sense an emptiness in one way or another,

but the Ascension call us to see with the eyes of faith a different reality revealed to us by God.

One where the Church as a whole and every member of that body,
not matter how small and seemingly insignificant,

is always full,
filled with the fullness of Christ and his grace.

The Father has '*blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*' (Eph 1:3).

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A GIFT, AS WELL AS A TASK

And for us to the Church to have this precious gift of the fullness of Christ,

also gives us our work,
our mission.

Because it's through his body the church,
that Christ's ministry of love and blessing will continue to be extended throughout the world,

or in the words of our Gospel reading tonight,
'that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.' Luke 24:47-48.

Christ is the head of the Church his body,
and that means his people are his hands and feet in the world today.

The fullness of Christ fills his church to bless her,
and to bless others through her.

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CONCLUSION

We look forward to gathering once again in this building,
as I'm sure all Christians do in their own regular spaces for worship.

Where we will gather around God's word,
and where we will receive together the body and blood of Jesus,

It is in his holy supper,
Where this fullness of his gracious presence is most visible and manifest.

But even during these unusual days,

let's remember the good news of Christ's ascension -

The Church is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Although our buildings are empty,
the Church is always full.

God grant it to us for Jesus' sake, Amen.