

Grace Notes in Miniature

For Monday, May 25, 2020

Dear friends:

Yesterday, we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension, one of the key events in our Church Year. Although we keep this observance on a Sunday it traditionally fell

on the Thursday which is the fortieth day in the Easter Season. Forty is a really interesting number: it has several features mathematically and minus forty degrees is the temperature at which the Fahrenheit and Celsius scales come together (i.e. $-40^{\circ}\text{F} = -40^{\circ}\text{C}$). Biblically, forty-day periods occur quite frequently: the forty days of the Flood, forty years of the Israelites in the desert, Moses spent forty days and nights on Mount Sinai three times; each time this period of forty... signifies the time between one epoch and another – the before and after.

In Christian Scripture, Jesus spent forty days in the desert, which we perpetuate in the forty days of Lent, and now, forty days after the Resurrection, Jesus ascends to the Father. One



commentary suggests that the before and after symbolism familiar to the Jewish people would be important as Jesus “tied up loose ends” in his relationship with his people, before leaving them in the care of the Holy Spirit. The Ascension is a final step in breaking down the barriers between heaven and earth as Jesus does not leave his physical body behind. And ten days later – or in our case – seven-, the promised Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will

descend. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2RMN7y-9aE> There has been an argument about the Holy Spirit dating back to the beginnings of the Church. This issue – called the Filioque clause (the Latin means ‘and the Son’) – gave rise to huge arguments about whether the Holy Spirit came just from the Father or from the Father and the Son: it was not until the early eleventh Century that Pope Benedict VIII had it added to the Nicene Creed for the Roman Rite. The Eastern Rite Churches have never added this, except for those in communion with Rome. It continues to be a sign of division although we no longer threaten each other with excommunication over it! The topic was discussed as recently as the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation in June 2002 and is examined less contentiously than before. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Holy Spirit was referred to as the Holy Ghost.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_AKDFsvrPg as perpetuated in some of our favourite hymns.





As we become more and more accustomed to on-line liturgy, I find that some parts of the Mass come into closer focus than we may usually experience. One such point is the washing of hands by the priest prior to the Prayers of Consecration. The words said by the priest are not usually audible to us – in fact, the Roman Missal directs that they be said quietly; however, we are more likely to hear them with the sensitivity of the microphones used for recording/broadcasting. He says, “Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sin”, symbolic of his desire to undertake this holy task with a clean heart and soul. These words come from Psalm 51, which we associate with Ash Wednesday, Lent and Penitential Rites.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWc-QSaw3ME> Possibly the most familiar verses are:

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. (NRSV)

Three words are used in this psalm: *transgressions*, *iniquity* and *sin*. Although we might think that these are just synonyms to reinforce the appeal to God to restore us to cleanliness of soul, they do mean different things. *Sin* means falling short of our goal to attain the glory of God and can be against God or against a person, doing the opposite of what we know to be right, doing something that will have a negative outcome, neglecting to do something we know to be right and which we ought to do. In the Penitential Act at Mass, we confess “that [we] have greatly sinned, in [our] thoughts and in [our] words, in what [we] have done and in what [we] have failed to do”. *Iniquity* implies a conscious decision to do something wrong without any consideration of repentance and could involve twisting a standard to our own ends; *transgression* is a willful rebellion against an accepted standard. Ultimately, we recognise that we are sinful people and that we need to reach out to God and ask for forgiveness. We also believe that God accepts our penitence and forgives us but that this is because God loves us infinitely and not because we are able to earn that love. For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:20) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2EtBYAa7JI>

John 15:9-10 reflects Jesus’ call to us, to keep his love alive after his Ascension to the Father:

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” (NRSV)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4Ya6G39usc>



With every blessing,
Gillian