



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

The Ascension of the Lord-Year A-May 21st2020

***Readings: Acts 1: 1-11, Psalm 46, Ephesians 1: 17-23,
Matthew 28: 16-20***

Sometimes there is no need to reinvent the wheel. When a great preacher and teacher and authority has put it better and more succinctly than you ever could then it is time to make way and just offer your little platform to his profound insights and eternal wisdom.

That was the overwhelming sense I had when praying the office of readings on the day before Ascension. On that morning we were gifted a sermon by Pope St. Leo the Great. Apart from his twenty year formative reign, at the end of the fifth century, Leo's preparation for the Council of Chalcedon and his definitive teaching on Christ, Leo is remembered for his courageous ride to confront the marauding army of the Huns. His personal embassy, in the power of prayer, turned away the terrifying Attila from the sacking of the Eternal City.

The other thing that always warms my heart on reading Leo is that it is so accessible. He reads just like he is sitting there talking to you across the centuries. The reader is privy to his thinking, his concerns and his humanity.

So what does our Holy Father say?

If we think of the forty days separating Resurrection from Ascension as primarily awaiting game then we have missed the point. Listen to Leo in his pithy summary:

‘These days did not pass by in uneventful leisure, but great mysteries were ratified and deep truths revealed.’

For those of us who have, necessarily been confined to the pursuit of uneventful leisure recently, this is a wonderful reminder of the valuable use of time to be with the Lord before we return to the whirligig of life and ministry and mission.

Leo goes on:

‘In those days, the fear of death was removed with all its terrors, and the immortality not only of the soul but also of the flesh was established.’

Here is a great contrast. We have been educated to fear death above all in our secular society. The Gospel does not tell us to be foolhardy in our dealings with mortality, but it does tell us not to be afraid. (As I have often noted, it is not unchristian to fear the various unpleasant ways of dying but we, above all, should look forward confidently to death.) So, the last few weeks have been a jolting reminder of our physical fragility and the lot of fallen man, But it has also driven us back on the reality of our Faith. Do we believe in the Resurrection or are we simply materialists?

Leo’s attitude to death can be summed up in his terrifying ride to encounter Attila and save his people. I’d be astonished if he was not afraid but it is clear that he had no hesitation in being faithful and certain that, for all the terrifying might of this stinking brutal barbarian horde, his destiny was lodged in Christ and Him Risen.

Thus, while death surrounds us – and one day it will be ours – be confident. Christ has risen is not a slogan. It is a reality.

Then Leo reminds us that this time in between was when Jesus, the Risen Lord, breathed on His Apostles and poured out the Holy Spirit upon them. This gift, given in private, we now know will flare up in a public

blaze at Pentecost and drive the Apostles (and the whole historic mission of the Church) out into the world.

We know also that the Petrine Office, foretold in Caesarea Philippi in the early ministry, is now confirmed in the post-penitent Peter and the source of unity and authority given for all time. For all the follies and sins of its members or office holders, there is no other Church. Where unity with Peter has been rejected, schism and heresy have inevitably obtained.

In this time we are, as Church, raised up from defeat and disappointment to return with hearts on fire because we have encountered the Risen Lord. The Emmaus Road underlines the understanding of Christ in the Scriptures and the unarguable importance of Holy Scripture as inerrant witness. We are given that astonishing insight into the Real and Abiding Presence in the breaking of the bread. Our understanding of Mass and Adoration (and indeed the whole Sacramental engine of Faith) is outlined and confirmed. In His Presence our 'timid trembling hearts' catch fire and fear and sorrow and disappointment are banished. We know that He accompanies us on the Way.

Resurrection is not myth but history and not just then but here and now. The confusion and sense of defeat on the Calvary of death is transformed into joy, confidence, courage and eternal purpose.

Leo concludes thus of the Ascension:

'Truly it was the great and unspeakable cause of their joy when, in the sight of the holy multitude the Nature of mankind went up:

Up above the dignity of all heavenly creatures,
to pass above the angels' ranks and to rise beyond the archangels' heights
its uplifting unlimited until, received to sit with the Eternal Father, it be
enthroned with his glory, to whose Nature it was united in the Son.'

In the light of all this we can turn confidently to the world, empowered by the Holy Spirit, hearts fired by the love and understanding of His Word, united with Peter, devoted to the Presence, fearless of death and looking forward with unwavering hope. Alleluia. Amen

St. Leo the Great pray for us.