

B189 In die Ascensionis Domini, Sermo unicus

St. Vincent Ferrer, O.P. – Sermon on the Ascension

Acts 1:9-11 Douay translation

9 And when he had said these things, while they looked on, he was raised up: and a cloud received him out of their sight. 10 And while they were beholding him going up to heaven, behold two men stood by them in white garments. 11 Who also said: Ye men of Galilee, why stand you looking up to heaven? This Jesus who is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come, as you have seen him going into heaven.

"While they looked on, he was raised up..." (Acts 1:9)

This text is found in the Acts of the Apostles, ch 1 and it is offered in today's Epistle. Today is the solemnity of the wonderful Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, when, having completed the work of our redemption, he ascended from this world into heaven openly before the Virgin Mary and the apostles and disciples. Our sermon will be about this blessed Ascension. But first let us hail the Virgin Mary

For the fundamental declaration of this text and the introduction of the material it must be known that our Lord Jesus Christ in the life which he had in this world, observed such an order and manner of living in his works that some works he chose to do secretly and hidden, others publicly and openly, and this for two reasons.

First, for our instruction, that we might do our good works in secret so as to flee vainglory, like a man hides his treasure, so good works ought to be hidden. Authority: "Take heed that you do not your justice before men, to be seen by them: otherwise you shall not have a reward of your Father who is in heaven," (Mt 6:1).

The second reason is that God the Father be praised and blessed by those [deeds] which he did publicly and openly. We are instructed that the good which we do publicly, like preaching or celebrating and others which cannot happen secretly, be for the praise and honor and glory of God. Therefore he himself said, "So let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven," (Mt 5:16). See why Christ in his life did some works secretly and hidden, and some publicly and openly.

For example, the first work which Christ did in this world for our redemption was his blessed incarnation in the womb of the Virgin, like the seed which is formed within the apple [avellanam] which is hidden, because

no human person but the Virgin Mary knew, according to the prophecy of David, "He shall come down like rain upon the fleece; and as showers falling gently upon the earth," so says the Psalmist in Ps 71:6: "Give to the king thy judgment, O God," (v. 2).

The second work was his birth, and this was public and manifest, because Christ wished to be born in a village [vico], that all might see him. The angels sang in the air and the animals adored him in the manger, the star led the kings immediately, and night seemed as day, according to the prophecy, "The people who walked in darkness, have seen a great light: to them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death, light is risen," (Isa 9:2).

The third work was the work of his everyday life, some of his works were hidden and some manifest. He lived about thirty years at home with Joseph and the Virgin Mary his mother. He was not working miracles, nor was his divinity known, although all people knew him to be a chaste man, holy and good, but not all considered him to be the Lord, because his divinity was hidden, according to the prophecy of Isaiah, "Truly you are a hidden God, the God of Israel the savior," (Isa 45:15).

But in his baptism he wished to be public and manifest, for the heaven was seen to be open and the Holy Spirit in the image of a dove descended on him, and a voice of the Father sounded saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17). Then John started to say "Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sin of the world," (Jn 1:29).

Then he immediately went into the desert and experienced a Lent, neither eating nor drinking anything in those forty days. And this work was a secret work giving to us the example of doing secretly penance, fasting, prayers, almsgivings and such.

Finally he left the desert and began publicly to preach to the whole people. So he said before Annas, "I have spoken openly to the world: I have always taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, whither all the Jews resort; and in secret I have spoken nothing," (Jn 18:20).

Another work was hidden, namely his transfiguration in which he revealed his divinity. This he wished to be secret, because none of the disciples were there but Peter, James and John whom he commanded, "Tell the vision to no man, till the Son of man be risen from the dead," (Mt 17:9).

Another work he wished to be public, namely the working of miracles, curing the sick, raising the dead. Therefore he himself said, "The works themselves, which I do, give testimony of me," (Jn 5:36).

Another hidden work was the Sacrament of the Altar. About which he said, "For my flesh is meat indeed: and my blood is drink indeed," (Jn 6:56). But his sorrowful passion was a public work, according to the prophecy, speaking in the person of Christ, "O all ye that pass by the way, attend, and see if there be any sorrow like to my sorrow," (Lam 1:12).

Another hidden work was his glorious Resurrection, because neither the Virgin Mary, nor others saw him rising.

But immediately there followed a public and manifest work, namely his glorious Ascension, because the Virgin Mary and seventy disciples, the apostles and holy women, in all there were about 120, and all saw him ascend. Therefore he said, "I go to him that sent me, and none of you asks me: Where are you going? " (Jn 16:5) About which the Gloss of Bede says: "As if openly he said "I return by ascending to him who constituted me to be incarnated, and it shall be so clear the brightness of his Ascension, that none of you will find it necessary to ask where are you going, because to all witnessing I shall go to heaven.

And this is our theme, "While they looked on," namely the Virgin Mary, the apostles and disciples, to the eyes of the public and openly, "he was raised up..," (Acts 1:9). See how the first work of our redemption was secret and hidden and the last, public and manifest. Of the middle works, some were hidden and some manifest.

About this glorious Ascension I wish now to preach to you three points, in which the entire matter of this feast is found:

First is the theological reason why this Ascension was expedient.

Second the historical details, how it was fitting.

Third is the ultimate utility, which resulted from this Ascension.

THEOLOGICAL REASON

The first theological reason why the Ascension of Christ was expedient is founded in this rule of philosophy saying. "Everything ardently loved draws to itself the heart and thoughts of the one loving." Just as the vapors of the earth are drawn up by the heat of the sun, and similarly the flame in a lamp gradually draws to itself all the oil, so a person ardently loved draws the one loving to themselves for thinking about them in his heart, for speaking [with] the mouth, for seeing [with] the eye, because such is the nature of love.

Although this be true, nevertheless I shall give you the authority of Christ saying, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also," (Lk 12:34).

Because the apostles and the other disciples most ardently loved the bodily presence of Christ – and no wonder, because he was overwhelmingly lovely because of the sweetness of his words and of gracious conversation and in other ways – therefore, as long as Christ was on earth, many were impeded from the delight in and reception of heavenly goods. They didn't bother to elevate their heart or desire to heaven. Christ said, "I shall make you raise your heart, and understanding, and your thoughts, on high, because I shall ascend to heaven." Therefore after the Ascension, their whole heart and desire and thoughts were raised on high.

See now the reason why it was expedient, not only for the apostles and disciples, but also for us, that he ascended, because no one would have cared about heaven, but rather where [on earth] Christ would have been. He himself gives this reason saying to the apostles, who were weeping over his departure, "But I tell you the truth: it is expedient to you that I go: for if I go not, the Paraclete will not come to you," (Jn 16:7). About which the Gloss of Bede says: "It is expedient for you that the form of the servant be withdrawn from your sight, to the extent that the love of divinity might more acutely be imprinted on your hearts." It is clear the reason for this blessed Ascension.

Morally [Moral sense of scripture] We have here a case of arguing from the minor premise, [*per locum a minori*]. If the Apostles are impeded from the reception of spiritual graces because of their love of Christ, what shall it be for us miserable ones, who do not so ardently love Christ like the apostles, but rather the transitory goods of this world, namely, riches, honors, offices, dignities, delights of the flesh, which do not permit us to elevate our understanding on high, but lower in earthly business? See how we are impeded from the reception of spiritual blessings and graces. For this reason the goods of this world ought to be loved with the salt of temperance [*cum sale temperantiae*], that is to say, the riches of this world should be loved in such a way so that because of them we don't lose the incorruptible riches of paradise, which never fail. The same for honors, so from love of them we don't lose the honors of paradise. O what an honor it is to be in the company of the holy angels and archangels, and more, and to be with the patriarchs, etc. The same for offices and dignities. The same for the delights of this world, so from the delights of beasts we don't lose the delights and honors and delectations of angels and saints. If you have a good wife, or if a woman, have a good husband, you ought to love them moderately, lest from love of them the love of God in your heart might be diminished. Same for the love of children and so of all the rest. Authority: "Love not the world," supply 'too much,' "nor the things which are in the world... For all that is in the world, is the concupiscence of the flesh," see here the sin of lust, "and the concupiscence of the eyes," see here the sin of avarice, "and the pride of life," see here the sin of pride from honors, offices, etc., (1 Jn 2:15-16).

HISTORICAL DETAILS

As to the second point, namely the historical details, how was the Ascension fitting? We know the reason why he ascended, we shall now see how he ascended. After the resurrection he did not wish to ascend to heaven immediately, but he wished to remain in the world for forty days, that he might prove his resurrection through many arguments, and that he might instruct and teach the Apostles. And on the fortieth day after his resurrection he wished to ascend to heaven.

For this reason today he appeared twice to the Apostles. Of the first apparition the gospel speaks. Of the second, today's epistle. Jesus, "appeared to the eleven [disciples] as they were at table," (Mk 16:14), greeting them in his usual way saying "Peace be to you." And he told them that today he wished to ascend to heaven, by which he completed the whole work of our redemption. Hearing this, the apostles began to weep. Christ said, "If you loved me, you would indeed be glad, because I go to the Father," (Jn 14:28). "Lord, we rejoice at your honor, but we are saddened, because you leave us orphans. Because of our sadness we unable to eat. So out of love of them Christ ate, so that they might eat. "And eating together with them, he commanded them, that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but should wait for the promise of the Father," (Acts 1:4).

They all got up from the table and in procession went out to the Mount of Olives according to what Jesus said. This is the reason why this procession is held in many places. When they had arrived on the Mount, Christ visibly appeared to them and saluted his mother and all the others saying that he wished to ascend to heaven to the Father.

The Virgin Mary who sensed the presence of the saints who were to ascend with Christ said to her son with tears that if he pleased, she would ascend with him. Christ drying her tears said, "Blessed Mother, you shall remain in my place. You shall comfort my apostles. And because of the wisdom which I shall give you, you will destroy heresies which arise. Because of this it is said of the Virgin Mary, "Rejoice, O Virgin Mary, you alone have destroyed all heresies in the whole world," (Antiphon, Little Office of the B.V.M.).

And the apostles asked that they might ascend with him, lest he leave them orphans. He said, "Going therefore, teach all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you," (Mt 28:19-20). "I will not leave you orphans," (Jn 14:18), "Behold I am with you," namely in the

Sacrament of the Altar, "all days, even to the consummation of the world," (Mt 28:20).

Finally Mary Magdalen said to him, "O Lord, I was a great baroness, and now I am a pauper. Therefore, please, may I ascend with you." And Christ said, "You shall be the companion of my mother."

When Jesus was raised off the ground, and began to ascend, the apostles "asked him, saying: Lord, will you at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). "Lord, will you come quickly to give the reign to Israel?" Christ responded, "It is not for you to know the times or moments, which the Father has put in his own power. But you shall receive the power of the Holy Ghost coming upon you, and you shall be witnesses unto me in Jerusalem," (Acts 1:7-8). Note, "It is not for you to know" the definite day of judgment, but we can say definitely soon, very soon.

When he was already ascending, they looked up at him and said, "Lord, give us a blessing." "And lifting up his hands, he blessed them," (Lk 24:50), just as the priest after mass gives a blessing to the people.

Then "a cloud received him out of their sight," (Acts 1:9), not that he needed that to ascend, but to show that every creature is subject to him. David said of God the Father, "You have subjected all things under his feet," (Ps 8:8). When however Christ was in heaven – he ascended quickly – because the apostles no longer could see him, he sent two angels to the apostles still gazing up to heaven, who said to them, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up to heaven? This Jesus who is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come, as you have seen him going into heaven," (Acts 1:11).

Behold the historical details, how this blessed Ascension was fitting, and how he ascended and sits at the right hand of God, and that the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled, "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and elevated, and his train filled the temple," (Isa 6:1). Then the apostles and disciples, "adoring went back into Jerusalem with great joy. And they were always in the temple, praising and blessing God," (Lk 24:52-53).

Morally. Here, when it is said "adoring, etc.," we have an example and a moral instruction about going to church and keeping the feast days with joy, closing our temporal businesses, as Christ rested on the day of resurrection. And they [the feasts] are kept perfectly, as it is hinted when it is said "they were always in the temple," that is perfectly. Indeed, your goods grow more from observing a feast well, than from your labors. Third, they are kept with a devout mind, when it is said "praising and blessing God," namely with silence hearing mass, [A canonical reference follows from Boniface VIII's Liber

Sextus, Book 3, title 23, chapter 2] *Extravagantes, de immuni, eccles. libr. 6, decret.*: "Let there be at church humble and devout entries, let quiet conversation [*quieta conversatio*] happen in them, pleasing to God, tranquil for onlookers, etc." This is said against those talking in church, etc.

ULTIMATE UTILITY

As to the third point, namely the ultimate utility resulting from this, from the Ascension, this utility or fruit he himself declared saying, "In my Father's house there are many mansions. If not, I would have told you: because I go to prepare a place for you. And if I shall go, and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and will take you to myself," (Jn 14:2-3). See here the ultimate utility resulting.

Note the many mansions are the nine orders of angels, which John calls "streets [plateas]." "And the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass," (Rev 21:21).

The first order or first street immediately upon entry [to the heavenly Jerusalem] is that of the holy angels, the second of the archangels, third of the principalities, fourth of the powers, fifth of the virtues, sixth of the dominations, seventh of the thrones, eighth of the Cherubim, and ninth of the Seraphim.

Christ has prepared these mansions. Therefore he said, "I go to prepare a place for you," (Jn 14:2). Note the great humility of Christ. Kings most often send out nuncios and shield bearers to prepare the place, but Christ the king of glory wished to go himself to prepare a place for us. There can here be an argument to the contrary. Since Christ said, "Come, you blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world," (Mt 25:34), how can he then say, "I go to prepare a place for you"?

I respond that this can be understood in two ways, namely either through individual distinction or through real possession. As to the first, it has already been prepared from the creation of the world, according to the authority of Mt 25, "Come, ye blessed..." In the second way, namely through real possession he prepares today according to the real distribution of saints, who with Christ ascended into the orders of angels according to the merits of each, because no one entered heaven till today, i.e. before the Ascension of Christ.

- Practically speaking when he was in heaven with the holy fathers, so many thousands gathered in the first street [stage], that of the angels. There he gathered those who in this world served him in penance,

each in his own chair. The name of each was already written there, and to each was given their crown on their head.

- In the order of archangels he gathered those who served him in spiritual works.
- In the third order, of the principalities, he gathered those who served him in works of mercy.
- In the fourth order, of powers, those who served him in great patience in adversities.
- In the fifth order, of virtues, those who served him in patience, not having ill will toward anyone. etc.
- In the sixth order, of dominations, he gathered the worldly leaders, rulers and judges, who with great justice ruled communities, etc.
- In the seventh order, of the thrones, those who for love of him embraced a life of poverty [vitam pauperem].
- In the eighth order, the Cherubim, the contemplatives, who had divine wisdom.
- In the ninth order, of the Seraphim, those burning with charity for love of God.

See how we understand, "I go to prepare a place for you, " with respect to real possession. Christ sits by himself over all orders of angels on the right, and is seen clearly by all. So the third point, and consequently the whole sermon is clear. Thanks be to God, etc.