

Mass Helps us to see Christ in our Midst

As we celebrate the Ascension this week, it's worth remembering that while Jesus ascended to heaven and we do not see Him physically on this earth in the way the apostles did, when we come to Mass, we receive both a foretaste of heaven, where we will be with Jesus forever, but also experience Jesus being with us to help us on our journey as we live out what the apostles are told to do, namely to go and baptize and make disciples of all the nations.

A few weeks ago I mentioned in a homily that at my first parish where I went after I was ordained, Holy Name of Jesus, the parish had a "Mass Appeal" where we had posters of parishioners in the lobby, with a statement on the poster of why Mass matters to them. Though each person had an answer, each had to do with how we find God more deeply at Mass. So how do we do that?

We come to Mass because we give thanks to God because God has blessed us and given us everything. At Mass, we link our thanks to God with the thanks Jesus gives to the Father, and in a special way here we encounter our Lord. The way that happens is through the awareness that we need forgiveness, through meditating on the Word of God that speaks to us, and through the Eucharist.

With respect to the our need for redemption, one of the first things we do at Mass is call to mind our sins. This is not because we want to wallow in shame or need to think about what bad horrible people we are. Rather, we remind ourselves that as a body of believers, God loves us all equally. We prepare ourselves to experience that love by acknowledging that we need it. By reflecting on our sins; by blessing ourselves with the holy water as a remembrance that we are blessed. Much like a stained glass window only works from the inside, the same is true with our souls - God's light is trying to get through, we just need to be properly prepared to receive it. This part of the Mass helps us to "open up the shades."

With respect to the Word, we sit down for the first set of readings. Think of it as a time to converse with God, as if a good friend is saying to you "sit down, we need to talk." Our readings give us a chance to hear what God has to say to us. At Mass we are invited to have an encounter with Jesus Christ, who is the Word proclaimed. This is the time to still our hearts, to listen to what God is speaking to us. To be comforted and challenged, convinced or consoled. We then stand at the Gospel as a sign of respect, much like you stand when someone important like a judge enters a room, because we are respectful to Jesus' presence in the Gospel. We even make the sign of the cross on our forehead, lips and hearts during this time because at that moment, we are saying that we dedicate our mind, our speech, and our hearts - the very center of our being to Jesus. After this, we sit for the homily, where the priest or deacon tries to relate the Word of God to our lives, to challenge us. And we then pray for one another in the Prayers of the Faithful, which are really important because it opens our eyes to this not being just between "me and Jesus," but we are mindful of everyone in need. This is why prayers of the faithful are for the needs of the greater community and world.

We then enter into the Liturgy of the Eucharist. We believe Jesus is present here, but certainly people are all over the map. The bells call to mind the solemnity of this part of the Mass. Even so, many Catholics just aren't aware of what Communion is. It's not a representation, or just a symbol. Jesus told us to do this in remembrance of Him, and that we must eat His body to have eternal life - and so we do that. Through Communion, Jesus is saying "I love you. I may have ascended to the Father, but I want you to have food for the journey as a reminder of how far I am willing to go for you, and of how deeply I love you." Communion frees us from venial sin; it gives us grace and strength. It is so sacred, but it can be so easy to take for granted. Sometimes people can lose sight of it's significance - which is to help us grow in holiness, and deepen our connection to one another. We have thought about our sins and now bring them to Jesus asking for forgiveness. But we also need to think about others as we receive Communion. Remember the story about making things right with your brother before bringing your gifts to the altar? That applies to Communion too. We should not offer the sign of peace and then be judging one another or gossiping one another. Pope Francis said it best: "When we go to Mass, we find ourselves with all sorts of people. Does the Eucharist we celebrate lead me to consider all of them as brothers and sisters? Does it increase my ability to rejoice when they do and to weep with those who weep?" He went on to say it is not enough to say one loves Jesus; it must be shown in love for those he loved. "Ask yourself, if going to Mass helps you reach out to the suffering or "am I indifferent, or am I gossiping, 'Did you see how that one's dressed?' Sometimes people do that after Mass. But this shouldn't happen." Maybe there is a lot of pain in your heart and you can't make amends with someone. But at the very least we need to think about that pain, and ask God to help us take steps toward healing and reconciliation. We then go back to our pew not to talk, but to spend time thinking about how God loves us. So prepare for Communion; think about how if you were the only one in the world, Jesus would have still died for you. And make sure that it never becomes just some personal moment, but that it opens your eyes to truly love others as Jesus has loved them.

Indeed one of the things that I see as a priest these days in the world is so much spiritual blindness. I suffer from it too at times which is why I need to continually see the eye doctor who is my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by praying daily, and trying to grow as a person. So many in the world are good, but also indifferent, thinking all that matters are the sports trophies, the jobs, the money. And still others may be very good at the kneeling, the genuflecting, and the rosaries, but never think about why they do these things. Standing before God one day and pointing to how many rosaries we said or that we were a nice person isn't going to cut it. But that's where grace comes in. Jesus is trying to break down the walls to your hearts - and the high point of our week is what happens here. This is where we open our eyes to see Jesus so we can go and proclaim what the Lord is telling us through the Word and through the Eucharist; so we can become a better person through moving away from sin thanks to the grace of Holy Communion.

So ask yourself, what are you doing? Are you here to fulfill an obligation, or out of habit? Or are you here because you want to see Jesus? I hope it's the later, because Jesus loves you and me so much. Yes He ascended to the Father, but He is present in so many ways, especially at this precious gift that is the Mass. So let's not take that for granted, but open our eyes to see our Lord who seeks us out, remembering that Mass isn't about a duty, but about a relationship with this God who is not just up there in heaven, but active in our lives. Let's just make sure we open the door to our soul to let Him in.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul