

It has come to my attention that a number of you are flipping through various recordings of priests and locations around the country – during this time of pandemic. And apparently we are being rated 1-10 on our preaching abilities. Some of my own family have told me that they pray with their local parish and then check in to see how badly their brother/uncle is doing this week. I find this all quite amusing. Now my momma raised ugly babies – but she did not raise stupid! SO, I'm taking this moment of homily time to ask those of you who are NOT from St. Andrew's to please consider supporting our work by sending us a donation! That way, you continue to have another source to critique. Thanks for your consideration.

And now for your Risus Paschalis. A priest went to the bedside of a man who was seriously ill in the hospital. He said to the family, "Take a break. I'll sit here and visit with James – you go and get yourselves something to eat." They left, and the priest went close to the bed. Suddenly, he saw that the man was rapidly fading. He couldn't talk and was trying to make signals and wave his arms, so the priest gave him a pencil and paper, and the man scribbled something down, and then he died. The family came back in, and the priest said, "I'm so sorry – but he's gone. He died. I'm glad I was here to comfort him and give him the anointing of the sick." Then the priest said, "Oh, there's one more thing. He wrote a note. It was something, obviously, that he really wanted you to know in the last moments of his life." He opened the note and read: "Please get off my oxygen tube!"

Oh – and one more thing – I looked in the mirror last weekend before I went out for the first parking lot communion service – alb & stole, mask, sunglasses, hat and gloves – and thought: "You look like a real dufus!" So I heard from one of the cars with several younger children in it – as they drove away, one of them said to his parents: "Who was THAT?!" Darth Vader Durbin of course!

OK, down to business. I have always found this one of the hardest feasts to preach about. But I have a new-found appreciation of this Feast of the Ascension due to some reading I did that opened a whole new understanding for me, which I hope may be helpful to you as well.

When we are baptized, we use the phrase that we 'put on Christ.' Our white baptismal garments symbolize this, and the ritual instructs, "May you bring this garment unstained into the everlasting life of heaven." Then when we are buried, our casket is covered with a white pall, reminiscent of this baptismal garment which, at the end of our lives, we return to God for final judgment of how we have worn it. As baptized Christians, we are to be 'other Christs.' We are the BODY OF CHRIST in the world. In other words, we IMITATE Christ, we try to act like Him, live like Him. We find the meaning of our own lives -- in His. He becomes the pattern, the model for us. Which brings us to today's Feast of the Ascension. Jesus both reveals – and identifies with our humanity in all of its stages, and even reveals the trajectory of all history – at its beginning, at its lowest points, and at its fulfilled end. Jesus, the Christ, the anointed of God, illustrates, as Ephesians phrases it "The One, Single New Man" (Eph 2:15) to use the phrase of St. Paul. Christ is then the Archetype, a Stand-in for all of us – all at once. (1 Cor 15:21-28, 45-49; Rom 5:15-21, 8:3; Col 3:10-11; Eph 2:14-22) Jesus' life is the map – the universal pattern of us all. Now don't blow your homiletical gaskets – but there are 6 pieces to this, but they're all pretty short in my explanation, but they are about an entire human life.

First, at the beginning, for Jesus and for us, the soul is already one with God. Just as Jesus is the Son of God, we also are sons and daughters of God from conception. Which is why the church is so pro-life. FROM conception, we are the creation of God. The ever-popular legend of the angel's kiss being the mark that forms our lips with this little indentation in the middle, intuitively this truth about the fact that we were once with God even before we were born. Jesus' unique and inclusive 'sonship' declare us to be 'co-heirs' and 'adopted children' in Paul's theology (Rom 8:14-17). Yet this divine conception is hidden from all of us until we discover it, as I believe Jesus had to do, too. He is not 'initiated' until He does. That's why the scriptures tell us that Jesus "grew in wisdom, and age and grace." He had to LEARN who He was – and what He was supposed to do with His life.

Second, there are several key moments where Jesus 'gets the message,' figures out who He is -- just as we often do when we are really listening. Think Jesus' Baptism and Transfiguration where He hears the Father say to Him: "You are my beloved One in whom I am well pleased." At His Baptism, Jesus is initiated into His life's work and ministry. He then sets out on His path to do His Father's will. But He is able to do what His Father asks because He knows who He is – He is the beloved one of God.

I often assign the passages on Jesus' Baptism and Transfiguration in confession when I sense people are feeling particularly bad about themselves. And I tell people I want them to pray over the line "You are my beloved one in whom I am well pleased" until they deeply believe it. We ARE God's beloved ones, and no sin of ours can ever change that beloved status. Praying over these texts until we believe them down to our beloved, holy toes, can literally change our lives. Once we know that we are the beloved one of God – and everyone of us IS – nothing in life is ever the same again. Sometimes we forget this truth or even deny it; but Jesus, our model, never denied His deep identity and always trusted God to be His Faithful Father – even on the cross. That's how He got through His struggle and passion. He knew that He was loved.

Third, even the Gospels seem to jump over Jesus' 30 years of uneventfulness, paralleling midlife for many of us, during which all the seeds are planted for a later sprouting. Jesus increasingly encountered trials and hostility, leading to abandonment and betrayal, just as most human lives do in some form or another. Our issues are usually more difficulties at work, raising children, struggling to love our spouses and be faithful in trying to live out this pattern of Christ in our daily lives. Right now the whole world is struggling with a virus that has gripped us in fear. For many, it has been a disaster – loss of family members, loss of job, loss of economic security, family tension with all the members of the household sheltering in place together, even despair. We are, like Christ on the cross, in a place of powerlessness. We are not in control of this situation. We have to do what Jesus did. Surrender to it. Surrender to a bigger plan than our own. It's an excruciatingly difficult struggle. The cross always is.

Fourth, at our lowest points, we are one step away from either enlightenment and growth – or darkness and despair. Without faith that there IS a Bigger Pattern, and the grace and humility to surrender to that Bigger Pattern, we easily move into despair, negativity, hoarding, greed, cynicism and criticism. We need a promise, a hopeful direction, an example -- or it is very hard not to give up. That's what Christ offers us.

When we have not yet learned what transformation feels like or looks like, we need someone to hold us in love – because we cannot hold ourselves. So someone – perhaps some loving friend, a family member, or simply God's own embrace – needs to nudge us forward. None of us will ever be saved by rules, laws, or being scolded. No – we are saved by love. Dostoevsky said, and Dorothy Day often repeated, "We will be saved by beauty." And when we experience this deep beautiful loving, this divine embrace, this is salvation! We have a sense that "God IS in the heavens and all is right with the world," even in the midst of pandemic. Even in the midst of terrible struggles and difficulties.

Fifth, Jesus revealed and identified with the final chapter of the human journey at its promised and now fulfilled form. He became the goal personified – the Risen Christ! This is where we are all heading – to resurrection. What humanity fears, hates, destroys, pollutes, kills, and crucifies, God promises to transform and raise up.

Sixth, quietly and almost imperceptibly, life comes full circle in what we call the Ascension of Jesus. We all return to where we first started, with the great school of life and earth ushering us back home to God. Now we know from our tradition, this is not an automatic thing. Almost all religions believe in some possibility of hell. This is because we have free will, otherwise we are mere puppets and God is simply a Puppeteer. We can refuse this whole journey of love. We can live for ourselves and forget the poor and needy. We can become bitter, angry, destructive poisoners of the world around us. Love can only exist in the realm of ever more perfect freedom. It is why we were made with free will. It takes growth and maturity and hard work to become a whole, holy, fully human, loving person. To become LIKE CHRIST. (this taken from Richard Rohr, daily internet posting of 5/12/2017, taken from his CD: GREAT THEMES OF PAUL: LIFE AS PARTICIPATION, disc 10, 2002)

And so my fellow 'Christed Ones,' what a wonderful example we have been given for our own lives – especially in time of Covid-19. To live a life like Christ, with all of its ups and downs, all of its trials and triumphs, is a lifelong challenge. The Paschal Mystery is the pattern, and the Ascension reminds us that something that was once on this earth is now in heaven. And promises us that the same possibility is open to us who now walk this earth. And the journey? It's about love. Loving God and neighbor. No exceptions. What more could we ask? What a gift! Amen.