

Homily for May 28, 2006  
Solemnity of the Ascension

By Father Charles Bowes

Acts 1:1–11  
Psalm 7:2–3, 6–9;  
Ephesians 1:17–23  
Mark 16:15–20

## *We are Christ to the world we touch.*

I recall as a young seminarian taking a course on comparative religions, and as one of the requirements, the class had to watch a film, a documentary, showing a Pentecostal Church congregation handling poisonous snakes.

And these were by no means little snakes – these were full-grown rattlesnakes. And there was noise and loud music and shouting – if I had been one of those snakes, I would have wanted to be anywhere but there. I was both skeptical and fascinated. Those folks, I figured, were either crazy or so faith-filled – such a religious expression amid such raucous noise – that it made me question my own faith and my expression of it as a Catholic. Was it somehow defective? Did I not trust enough? Should I give Pentecostalism a try? After all, our Gospel, Mark 16, has Jesus say that among other signs, “...those who believe...will pick up serpents with their hands...”

After the film, the seminarians talked about it, and with the guidance of our professor, we learned that the Christian Tradition of which we were a part never did take literally those words of St. Mark’s Gospel. Rather, the words were meant to symbolize the power and protection faith in the gospel brings to a believer. They are not to be taken literally or used as a litmus

test to identify an authentic believer. Fanaticism is not part of the Christian faith. And yet there was a part of me that admired those fanatics in that little Pentecostal Church – wanting so much to believe that they would risk their lives to do so.

Before he ascends into heaven, Jesus is depicted as commissioning his disciples to carry on his work of proclaiming the Good News. “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature,” the text reads. Important here is the emphasis on “whole world” and “every creature.” The commissioning is to a global and universal mission. The only criterion for salvation is belief in the gospel. “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned,” says the gospel.

Race, gender, country and previous religious affiliation count for nothing. Belief confirmed in baptism is all that matters. “And what about those who don’t believe?” I asked the professor. “Are they condemned as the gospel says?” I asked. “All that is in the hands of God, a merciful God,” he replied.

And as Jesus departs, the disciples do not grieve or linger. Instead, they immediately take up their commission and begin preaching the gospel everywhere to everyone. While Jesus is no longer physically present with them, they hold firm to the belief that somehow he is still in their midst, through his Spirit, inspiring and sustaining their divine mission.

And they are everywhere – these disciples of Jesus – too numerous, really, to count. You will find them in New York City, at the Catholic Worker, where volunteers ladle soup every day to dozens of homeless men and women. His footprints are there, in the soup line. You will find them in hospitals and hospices, in places like Baltimore and Uganda, where men, women and children are dying of AIDS, and tender hands are there to wipe a brow, clean a sore or dry a tear. His footprints are in the halls and waiting rooms, on floors of linoleum or wood, left on bed sheets and slippers. You will find his disciples on the marble floors of great cathedrals, and on the plain planks of roadside chapels, where believers of many faiths gather to sit and kneel, to listen and pray. You will find them on the floors of nurseries, where mothers walk all night caring for their sick infants, and you will find them on dusty roads where lonely teenagers are walking until morning, looking for someone, anyone, who will understand. His disciples are on the coffee-stained carpets of church basements, where weekly AA meetings are held; they are found in velvet-draped reconciliation rooms where burdens are emptied; they are in diners and laundromats, bus stations and train platforms, crisis centers and nail salons.

In the person of his disciples, Jesus has traveled the world at least a million times. Is there anyplace he has left untouched? His disciples are in barracks in Basra, and kitchens in Croatia, and cloisters in Georgia. Look carefully. You might even find him in your own living room...in you and in those you love.

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