

## To the Ends of the Earth

Today's Gospel reading takes place on Maundy Thursday at the Last Supper. It follows the last couple of weeks where we heard some of Jesus' last instructions to the disciples. Today's reading is a prayer by Jesus to the Father on behalf of the disciples. Jesus is almost talking in a circular fashion and if one is not paying attention, could get lost in this prayer. Jesus is talking in the third person about Himself and had continued the line of thought about being in each other and the like. The difference here is that Jesus is talking to the Father about including the disciples into that relationship that Jesus and the Father have. Remember, this is all going on before Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It would not surprise me that there was a bit of head-scratching from the disciples on that Thursday evening, maybe wondering if someone had a bit too much wine to drink.

Fast forward now 7 weeks. Easter Sunday is passed and the disciples had several encounters with the risen Jesus to be convinced that He indeed had been physically raised from the dead and brought back to life. Having shared meals with Jesus added to the eyewitness encounters that it was Jesus in the flesh and not some sort of hallucination by the disciples. So, now it seemed to be the perfect time to assume the duties and expectations of the Messiah and get rid of the Romans so that the Israelites could rule themselves with no outside interference. However, that is not what happened. Jesus tells them that they are going to go out and tell people about Jesus and who He is. Then suddenly, Jesus goes up beyond the clouds, out of sight.

When Jesus told the disciples that they would be His witnesses to the ends of the earth, it has been traditionally understood that it meant around the globe in a physical sense, to the four corners of the orb that is earth. This is

understandable since Jesus gave physical references of how their mission was going to proceed. This physical reference, by the way, is the opposite of how people would react in the Old Testament when they learned about God and how the Israelites were blessed by God. Then, the people would come to Jerusalem, come to the Temple in the city and worship God there. Jesus is reversing that movement away from Jerusalem. Jerusalem is now the starting point, not the destination. In using physical locations to show how the Good News of Jesus will be spread, it is only natural that we would continue in that when Jesus talks about the ends of the earth.

This traditional understanding of the text then raises the question, "What happens when everyone in every country has heard about Jesus?" Is our mission then done and we can just sit back and receive our kudos for a job well done? Or do we hear these words in such a way that, when combined with the Great Commission in Matthew's Gospel account, our job isn't over until everyone, everywhere is a Christian? If we take this approach, then we will tend to disregard the belief that we cannot come to faith in Jesus on our own. It then becomes our work, our efforts and the work of the Holy Spirit is not required.

Or is there another way of understanding this commission of Jesus to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth? What if it wasn't about a physical place, but more of a time? What if Jesus is telling us to always be giving witness to Him until the earth is no more, until the time when Jesus comes and establishes the new earth with the new heaven? Does this change the way we look at how we go about life?

When we look at this commission in this fashion, then we recognize the importance of needing the Holy Spirit to sustain us, to keep us on the right path, to

guide us in how to give witness to Jesus in word and work. We learn to have that reliance upon God and realize that we, as being a part of the creation, are nothing but dust without God and Jesus. We realize that we have not done anything to be who and where we are. We did not choose when to be born, who our parents are, what physical and mental characteristics we have, or where we were going to be born. We had no control over any of those things. All that we are, all that we have was given to us by God through the Holy Spirit. Who we are and what we have is what the Holy Spirit knows that we need to accomplish this mission of being Jesus' witnesses until the 'ends of the earth'. We better understand the storyline that God breathed the Spirit into our dusty bodies, giving us life. It is our own desire to be more than a creation that leads us away from God. The only place that this desire leads is to a place that is without God forever. Jesus restores that relationship between humanity and God and brings us into the same kind of relationship that Jesus has with the Father and giving us eternal life with God. Therefore, it is our mission to tell others about this Good News of Jesus - that through Him we are given eternal life with God.

So, while we can understand Jesus' call to the disciples, to us, as one to go to all the physical places on earth to spread the Good News about Jesus, we get a slightly different, a slightly deeper understanding when we hear these words to apply to the end of the time of the present earth. We are to tell others through words and works of the love that Jesus has for us, what His sacrifice granted us and how blessed by God we are because of Jesus. We are to do this in a manner similar to Paul's exhortation in first Thessalonians where he says to pray without ceasing. All that we do and say should point to what God has given us and we should

give thanks to God that through Jesus we can enjoy eternal life with God and enjoy the blessings which we are given by God through the Holy Spirit.

In just a short while, Halle and Angie will be affirming the promises made on their behalf when they were baptized, the time when God placed His seal on them and claimed them as having a special relationship with them through Jesus Christ. Hopefully, as they studied the Bible and the history of the church and learned more about their Christian faith, they will have learned that faith in God, that their Christian faith is more than just a set of statements of belief. As they continue their journey in life, may they see that Christianity is a living faith, a faith that puts into action all those statements of belief and may their reliance on God continue to grow. In their favorite Bible verses, each of the girls have picked out a verse that points to this reliance, this confidence that through Jesus, they can face anything that comes their way. The verses also hint at what will happen when that reliance upon Jesus is not there in a person's life. I pray that both of these young women will continue to grow in their trust in God and Jesus and be willing to go where the Holy Spirit leads them; being confident in their identity of being a child of God baptized in Jesus' name will that they may overcome any adversity, come through any 'valley of the shadow of death' and be the person which God wants them to be.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/lZuz3lZBVA0>

Service: <https://youtu.be/N2CONukIvCs>