

Ascension 2017
05/28/17

It's hard to nail down when the Ascension actually took place. Reading some of the documents, it looks like Jesus ascended Easter night. Others suggest 40 days after the Resurrection, which lends credence to why we celebrate it when we do. But obviously the point is not when the event took place but the significance of the event itself. Or more precisely, the significance of what happened after Jesus ascended.

One author suggests that the Risen Lord, after spending time with the disciples, returned to heaven, leaving them – and now us – to continue and fulfill His work on earth through the ministry of the Church.

In his book, *Divine Renovation*, Fr. James Mallon tells us Jesus gave the early Church four tasks: go, make, baptize, and teach. In the original Greek, one of these is a finite verb and three are participles. Before you think I have suddenly taken up the Greek language in my spare time, let me explain what Fr. Mallon is getting at.

He says a finite verb is always the hinge of a sentence and participles are verbal nouns that ultimately make sense only in reference to the finite verb. So it is with the Great Commission. One of the verbs is the grammatical center of the sentence and thus also the theological center. Let me take a quick, unscientific poll and ask which of the verbs you think is the hinge?

(Invite people to raise hands.) How many would choose “go”? “Make”? “Baptize”? “Teach”? Those of you who chose make were correct. Fr. Mallon suggests it is around the making of disciples that all the other missionary aspects of the Church revolve: the going, the baptizing and the teaching.

He speaks of watching the movie *Titanic* and suddenly seeing it as a metaphor for the Church. We exist for mission; we have been sent to seek and save those who are lost, those who are perishing

like the passengers on the Titanic. He says that in the 18 lifeboats, there were 472 unused spaces. After the ship went under, some 1,500 people floundered in the icy waters while lifeboats sat at a safe distance and just watched. Only 2 of the lifeboats went to rescue survivors but by the time those in the 2 boats recalled their purpose, just 9 people were found alive.

You may be asking where I'm going with this tragic story of the Titanic. Well, Fr. Mallon reminds us that so often as a Church, we sit at a safe distance, more concerned with our own needs and comfort. Perhaps if a few swam to us, we might help them but us going to them? Sometimes it seems foreign to our way of thinking. Lifeboats exist to rescue people and so does the Church.

He goes on to say that we maintain our lifeboats, we paint them, we serve the people in them and keep them in good order but we do not use them for the purpose for which they were created. Any crew member who would dare to disrupt life on the lifeboat will quickly hear a chorus of complaints from the passengers who are adverse to being inconvenienced in any way. He ends by saying we lament the tragedy of the loss of faith, secularization, church closures and so on. But does it ever occur to us to pick up the oars and row?

The angels asked the disciples why they were standing around, looking up at the sky. If you've ever had to sit in the front row at a movie, you know that after a while, you begin to have a stiff neck. So you do something about it – you move to a different seat. Well, it's time for us to stop gazing up at the heavens and become a training ground for missionaries. If you were here last week, you heard me quote Bishop Caggiano who said that each of us is called to be a new Moses, because our people are in the wilderness.

In one of his works, George Bernard Shaw said: "You see things, and you say 'Why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say, 'Why not?'" Instead of dreaming, let's start asking ourselves the why not question instead of the why question and then imagine the possibilities...