

Ascension of Christ – I am with you always

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May 28, 2017
Gospel Reading: Matthew 28:16-20*

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This past Thursday the Armenian Church and Christians throughout the world celebrated the Feast of the Ascension of Christ. We remember this event every Sunday during the recitation of the Nicene Creed when we say, "...ascending into heaven, with the same body, and sat at the right hand of the Father." His final words

Tradition tells us that forty days after Christ's resurrection, Jesus with His disciples, gathered at the Mount of Olives and there He gave His final commands, known as the Great Commission. It goes as follows, *"Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world'"* (Matthew 28:16-20).

There were four commands which Christ gave the disciples:

1. Go! – Go all over the world. There were no longer disciples, but now apostles because they were being sent out. We too must go out from the church because the outside world is our workplace.
2. Make disciples! – Now the disciples were to make disciples and they would do this by showing them the life that Christ lived. This is how we too can become disciples of Christ, by imitating His life.
3. Baptize! – Naturally, this command is reserved specifically to the apostles and priests, but the laity can help in this endeavor. Baptism, especially in the Eastern Churches, is the act of joining the Body of Christ – the Church. We are called to bring people to church and make them members.

4. Teach! – Christ tells them and us to teach others all the commandments He has given us, not just the ones we like, but also the ones we don't like, such as, love your enemy.

Usually we think that these are the only four things that we need to do, but there is still one more word that Christ has for His disciples and for us, “And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world”. This final promise probably gave the apostles the ability and courage to go to the ends of the earth preaching the Gospel.

Christ did not say, “I showed you what to do, so now I'm leaving. Good luck!” but “I (God) am with you”. It is interesting how the Gospel begins with the prophecy of Emanuel (God is with us) being fulfilled through the incarnation and the Gospel ends with the same promise being made, “I am with you”.

This promise rang in the ears and dwelt in the hearts of the apostles until their final breath. St. Peter remembered this when he was crucified in Rome. St. James remembered this when he was thrown from Temple in Jerusalem. St. Thaddeus remembered this when he was beheaded in Persia. St. Bartholomew remembered this when he was skinned alive in Armenia. We know this because in all the accounts of the lives of the saints, they say that when the saints gave up their spirits, they had a look of peace on their faces and I believe that is because they knew Christ was with them.

Yet, in our everyday lives, we do not hear this enough. We don't realize Christ is with us, but we do hear that other things are with us constantly: bills, illness, worry, fear, anger, pain, jealousy, sin and death. How different would we approach life and all these things if we remembered that Christ is with us?

It is difficult to comprehend this in the world we live today. We might ask, where is Christ when a bomb explodes in a concert in Manchester? Or where is Christ when Coptic Christians are martyred on their way to a pilgrimage? The answer is in Holy Communion, for we approach the Holy Chalice with love and unity in Christ. Christ reminds us saying, “When two or three are gathered in My name, there I am” (Matthew 18:20). When we are gathered in love, Christ is present and He is with us.

So let us show Christ's presence in this world to others, but let us also remember that Christ is with us. No matter what we go through or how difficult life may be, Christ's promise is unfailing and unfading: I am with always, even unto the end of the world.

Amen.