

7th Sunday of Pascha  
Sunday after Ascension  
May 31, 2020

My Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Glory to Jesus Christ!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!

We have been “travelling” together for quite a while now in a manner to which we were not previously accustomed. Well, I suppose it is not that long, but may seem a long since many of you were accustomed to coming to St. Matthew's as a regular part of your schedule. In the whole scheme of life, especially for those of us who are older, two and a half months is not in fact that long, but for sure, everything regarding the effects of the Covid-19 virus on the St. Matthew's Community happened pretty quickly. I still think that many of us could not have imagined even at the beginning of February of this year how quickly, dramatically and tragically things would change in our society.

In retrospect, contemplating my own experience of all that's transpired since January, I certainly saw how everything was developing elsewhere in the world but if someone had suggested to me that our church would be completely closed for as long as it was, I'd have thought they were catastrophizing and exaggerating. It was happening far away. Honestly, speaking now for myself, how much more illogical could I have been? I lived in Asia for four years. Far away Asia means less than twenty hours to the east coast of the United States. The moon is far away, Mars is far away and places on Earth may take some time to reach, but “far away” for an invisible virus is now a long plane ride away. For that matter organisms that cause disease have never been confined by distance even before the “jet age”. It may have taken longer for a pandemic to develop whether influenza or plague but these have occurred throughout the history of this fallen world. My point being really for myself is – what was I thinking or not thinking? So we have all been faced with this new reality, but it is new only to us in 2020. It is not new to this fallen world. And so, we adapt just as human beings have many times before.

The disciples of Christ too had a lot of change occur in their lives in a very short amount of time. As the changes that have occurred here in a few months were beyond my wildest imagination, I am surmising that what they experienced and witnessed in Christ's ministry, His arrest, death and Resurrection was beyond anything they might have anticipated or imagined. Even though Christ had told them what was to come it was something that no one had ever witnessed. So, as the events of Christ's life and eventual Resurrection unfolded before them they adapted and

accepted the strength and knowledge that they had been revealed to them.  
To say the least, it was a lot “to take in” just as all that has occurred recently for us is a lot to take in.

Let's be aware again, that we have been walking together with them in these past months. This past Thursday we had the opportunity to “participate” in the Most Glorious Ascension of Christ, which occurs forty days after the Resurrection. In my experience I have seen that few people come to Church for that Liturgy (I assume for very good reasons!!!!...like work or school, and those are valid reasons). I am by no means chastising folks for not being able to attend that Liturgy in the past. Being in Phase One, Stage One of the OCA's guidelines towards gradual reopening, we did not have Liturgy. But even in years past, when many of you could not have attended that Liturgy, I believe that you were aware that the feast was occurring, just as you were aware that it was taking place on Thursday. In essence many of you experienced it the same way you always have, by knowing it, even if you were not able to attend Liturgy. Just as the Resurrection was not “stopped” because we could not have services, the Ascension took place also and we remain in that feast today. The disciples of Christ continued to enjoy His physical presence with them for the forty days after the Resurrection, as we have this year. Now they faced another new reality. His physical presence would be gone from them. They, though, had been fortified, so to speak, during the period of time before He ascended. They had grasped the significance of why God, Himself had been Incarnate among them. They trusted and believed. With the physical human form of Christ ascending everything had come full circle. As we hear in our hymnography, He has “united Earth to Heaven, having lived incarnate and died and lived again, He ascends to the perfect place where GOD IS. This is a necessary part of uniting fallen humanity/earth with God. Let us note that the disciples did not beg Him to stay, they didn't grab on to Him imploring “No, no, don't leave us! You can't leave us now; it'll be too hard.”

This was a new situation for them; however, they adapt to this reality. But the true reality was that He wasn't “going” anywhere away from them. He had specifically said that He would not “leave them desolate”. And God has never left the world desolate. Not now in this deadly Pandemic, not for a second in all that has ever occurred. Furthermore, they knew and believed that the Holy Spirit would come to them and they were filled with joy and with anticipation. Just as we too are filled with the joy in anticipation of the Descent of the Holy Spirit – within ten days we have the Ascent of Christ and then the Descent of the Holy Spirit which we witness next Sunday.

**EARTH AND HEAVEN ARE UNITED!!!  
LET US REJOICE, GO FORTH REJOICING AS THE DISCIPLES DID, AS DISCIPLES THAT EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US IS!!!!**

God is not oblivious to what is happening to us now, to the pain and heartache and the crushing grief of the loss of loved-ones – hundreds of thousands of people who have died throughout the world, over a hundred thousand people in our own country, people that were all alive on this earth last fall. God is not oblivious to the physical torment that this disease has caused and is causing in His Creation for millions of people around our beloved planet. God's sees your loving sacrifice in not being able to attend Church. He knows that you have done this to save lives. In fact, your sacrifice, I think, without question, just by you not coming to St. Matthew's out of Love, has literally saved people from dying and saved people from mourning the loss of their loved ones. I have no medical expertise, but it is not a leap to think that if we had continued to have services as usual people would have died as a result, it could have been within our community or outside of it. Your sacrifice has literally saved lives and stemmed the even wider grieving that would have occurred. God blessed you for your sacrifice. As USUAL St. Matthew's you inspire me.

I always mention the Kontakion hymn that we sing for the Ascension feast, which is so simply profound and comprehensible. The final line being "I am with you and no one will be against you". Now obviously in life there are people or circumstances that are against us, like this virus, but what Christ, who Himself had people against Him, is telling us is that nothing can conquer us. Not evil, not sickness and not death. For God is with, GOD IS WITH US!! CHRIST IS IN OUR MIDST!!

Listen now again to the words of the Kontakion hymn for this feast, listen, believe and accept and adapt your life, not only to what's happening in the world now, BUT to this greater true and eternal reality...

*"When You had fulfilled the dispensation for our sake,  
and united earth to heaven:  
You ascended in glory, O Christ our God,  
not being parted from those who love You,  
but remaining with them and crying:  
'I am with you, and there is no one against you!'"*