

Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 15, 2011
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Scriptures: Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

Left Behind

By now it's old news, but let us recap what was supposed to happen on May 21. That day, we were told, was supposed to be beginning of the end. Rapture was supposed to have happened followed by the "end of the world" a few months later. And yet, here we are. The way I see it, this can be the result of one of two things. This could simply be another one on the long list of people trying to get their 15 minutes of fame by talking apocalyptic talk. Actually this guy, Harold Camping, is now into his 30 minutes of fame since this is his second attempt at predicting the rapture. A second possibility is that the rapture actually happened and we were all left behind. Which is really, really bad news.

We seem to keep having this fascination with the end of the world which is really problematic. We continue our attempts at trying to decipher God's mind forgetting on the way what Jesus said: "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). In fact, we continue to be concerned about the wrong issue: trying to figure out the future at the expense of the present.

Take for example the also famous "Left Behind" book series. It is supposedly concerned about the tribulations that those not raptured (i.e. left behind) will have to face in the world. They are left to deal with a chaotic and shattered world. It describes the destruction, calamity and suffering that would happen. It is literally the end of the world. Roll the credits. Bring down the curtains. It's all finished. There's no tomorrow. Although it is a religion-fiction book, many people have taken it as actual predictions about the future. With such a bleak view of the time to come, many have felt tempted to abandon their present.

Did the disciples feel like that when Jesus began his farewell discourse? I'm thinking that such a feeling would have been justified. Jesus, their leader and friend, is leaving and they are, well, left behind. Nevertheless, is that what the gospel says? You know, that they will be simply left behind? Is Jesus saying that the job is done that there is nothing more to do? The disciples on the road to Emmaus felt like that. They were going back home because the "show" was over. But, as it happens many times, Jesus words are misunderstood. Like Nicodemus who couldn't understand how he was supposed to get back in his mother's womb. Or the Samaritan woman at the well, who wanted the water Jesus had so she wouldn't have to keep hauling water to her house. And now also like the disciples, who couldn't picture their lives after Jesus because he was not going to be no more. They have to see the whole picture. Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension have a purpose: to know God. To know God revealed. To realize what God is doing in the world. As Jesus says in today's gospel, they (the disciples) know God

because they have known him. And then, having known God, they can continue the work that God has initiated through Jesus. From the beginning, Jesus revelation was meant so that we continue the work that God entrusted to Jesus in the first place.

Take for example the reading from Acts. I love the irony and even playful sarcasm of it. You get there one of those dramatic scenes that makes for great Hollywood movies. Imagine it like this. You first get the tenacious group of disciples that have gone through the pain and difficulties of following Jesus. The ridicule, the sacrifice of personal things, the persecution and even the danger to their own lives. Then there's the triumphant Jesus, raised from the dead, giving them his last words. While still talking to them, a cloud lifts him up to heaven leaving a pious group of believers looking up in awe as they witness such a glorious miracle. Doesn't that make for a wonderful finale for a summer blockbuster movie? But then these two other figures appear in front of them saying, (this is my own take on what Acts describes) "now, what are you doing just standing there looking up to the sky? There's work to do. There are lessons to teach. There's a gospel to preach. There are new disciples to make. You are not left behind, you are in charge now. Not alone, not by yourselves, but led, empowered, gifted, guided by God, by the Holy Spirit. Didn't you hear what Jesus said? Go back to Jerusalem, wait there for the Holy Spirit to come, and then go witness, to the ends of the earth. Preach what you've heard, share what you've seen, do for others what he has done for you."

In his commentary to the gospel reading, David Lose says: "Jesus leaves, but we stay. As it turns out, this is the ultimate 'left behind' story, but according to Jesus, being left behind is neither a sign of imperfect faith nor a chance to prove your self worthy. Rather, being left behind is an honor, an invitation to participate in the glory of the Father, a commissioning, in fact, into the work of the Son."

And that's where we are, my brothers and sisters. That's where it links to us. This is where the rubber meets the road. This is where and when we intersect the gospel. We are not left behind, at least not in the sense that we most often hear about. We are charged forward, sent to do a task, entrusted with a mission, commissioned to do a ministry. Be that we preach, teach, give out food, help children to read or whatever else; regardless of what we do in our daily lives, if we use what we do and what we have in serving, in making a difference; if we connect the dots between what we hear and learn from Jesus to the world around us, then we are carrying up the gospel forward. This is not a left behind story with a hopeless future. This is an "it's our turn now" story in which we focus on the present to continue doing the work that Jesus began.

We can do this in spite of our doubts because we have our Lord and Savior, the Lamb of God who died on the cross, the victorious Christ that raised from the tomb, praying, interceding for us before God. "I am asking on their behalf" says Jesus as he prepares to leave. "Holy Father, protect them in your name so that they may be one, as we are one." And to that we can only say, amen.