

The Risen Christ appears to His disciples one last time before His Ascension. We ought not think of the Ascension in physical terms only: Jesus floating up into the sky as if in a hot air balloon, like The Wizard leaving Oz without Dorothy. You might want to say, “hold on, Father. In the first reading from Acts it says, “he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.” Where else do you find clouds, but in the sky?

Where else, indeed. The biblical writers in ancient times were not at all like 21st century newspaper reporters. They used different ways of expression: metaphors, comparisons, illustrations to make a point.

In Holy Scripture, the image of the cloud represents the presence of God. Here are two examples, one from the New Testament and one from the Old. In the scene of the Transfiguration, which is given in Matthew, Mark and Luke, a cloud appears on the mountain top while Jesus is speaking to Peter, James, and John. Matthew 17 says,

“While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!””

God the Father’s presence is given in a cloud from which He introduces His Son to those standing by. This cloud isn’t necessarily in the sky, but on a mountain top, a place low enough for Jesus and the others to stand.

An example from the Old Testament comes with the scene of the opening of the Temple built by King Solomon. As the priests were bringing the ark of the covenant into the Temple, we are told in I Kings chapter 8,

“It happened that when the priests came from the holy place, the cloud filled the house of the LORD,¹¹ so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.”

The cloud signifies the presence of the Lord, and this time it is at ground level. So when biblical writers mention a cloud, they do not necessarily mean a cloud up in the sky.

Instead, we should think of Jesus' Ascension in terms of His royal appointment. As Lord of Lords, and King of Kings, Jesus ascends to His throne. This ascension, this throne is rightfully His, the proper place for the Redeemer of all humanity, to whom all power in heaven and on earth has been given.

And so when we read in the Acts of the Apostles that a cloud took Him from their sight, Luke means that Jesus returned to His Father, fully God and fully man, not in a vertical manner, but in a formal way, in terms of honor, glory and majesty.

Matthew closes His Gospel with a concise summary of the entire Gospel message. Christ is risen, and through His apostles, He extends the authority given to him over all the world. By commanding His listeners to baptize, He means that His Church will be global and universal. Through His Church, Jesus Himself will be present to all His beloved.

In the first chapter of Matthew's gospel, he quotes the prophet Isaiah to indicate that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophesy:

“. . . behold, the angel of the Lord* appeared to [Joseph] in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus,* because he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means “God is with us.”

And so Matthew closes his gospel with the same message when the risen Jesus tells us, “And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

Jesus does not give us marching orders only to go off and retire, checking on our progress from time to time. He is with us as we go out baptizing and making disciples of all nations.

Not only is Jesus with us, He Himself is actually the maker of disciples. We are His subjects, His agents. He acts through us. It is Him the world should see when they see the Church, not us.

In ancient times, a disciple was known to be someone who sat at the feet of a master, listening to his teachings and forming his life accordingly. Disciples discipline themselves and change their lives according to the master's teachings and commands.

Jesus doesn't tell His followers to go out and collect members for their churches. He doesn't tell them to go and fill the pews. He commands His Church to go into all the world and make disciples.

If we are followers of Jesus, if we belong to Him, we will discipline ourselves according to His teachings. We will love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and we will love our neighbors as ourselves. We will forgive others as He forgives us. We will receive His Body and Blood in Holy Eucharist. We will confess our sins and receive absolution. We will give of our time, talent and treasure toward the advancement of His Kingdom.

If we do that, our reward will be very great in Heaven, when our Lord Jesus Christ raises us up.

We are not alone and never have been. Jesus knows full well that discipleship isn't easy. His own twelve disciples were slow to catch on, they

failed Him again and again, they fell asleep when He need them most in the Garden of Gethsemane. Peter denied Jesus three times. The disciples had no training or preparation to be disciples. But they were empowered by the coming of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent because He ascended to the Father, and through them Jesus built and continues to build His Church.

And so we press on, with the Lord's help, His presence and the guidance and working of the Holy Spirit, to make ourselves His disciples and to bring others with us. Amen.