

HOMILY FOR NEOPHYTE MASS AT ST BARNABAS CATHEDRAL  
ON SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

“When they saw him they fell down before him, though some hesitated. Jesus came up and spoke to them. He said, ‘all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me’”

We too, here today at Mass, like those first disciples, are invited and challenged to accept and respond to the authority that the Risen and glorified Jesus has received from his Father. I say challenged because this gospel text seems to suggest that some of the first disciples of the Risen Jesus felt challenged. We are told, they fell down on their knees before his authority, but ‘some hesitated’.

Some of us may also feel a little uncomfortable with this idea of accepting the authority, the Lordship of the Risen Christ in our lives, because the word ‘authority’ may convey to us the notion of coercion, of being forced to accept something that we may be hesitant and unsure about. But, when we look more closely at Jesus’ relationship with his disciples, as presented in the gospels, we see that there is never coercion on the part of Jesus, but always an invitation, a challenge to respond freely to him. The same is true in the relationship that the Risen Jesus wants with us, that we choose freely to open our hearts and lives to his authority, to his being Lord of our lives and so inspiring the way we live.

Today’s Solemn Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord gives us all the opportunity, and especially those of you who, at Easter, were baptised or received into full communion with the Catholic Church, to reflect upon the degree to which we have each freely accepted and are responding to the fullness of the authority of the Risen and Ascended Christ in our lives. In the early days of the Church it was a person’s capacity to say ‘Jesus is Lord’ that was the test by which the acceptance of the Good News of Christ was measured. But we should not underestimate what was involved in saying those words. The early Church saw clearly that the measure of a person’s submission to Christ’s authority, was the depth with which that person acknowledged and responded to Jesus as Lord, in the manner with which they lived their daily lives. Indeed, the Early Church saw clearly that when that phrase, ‘Jesus is Lord’ was simply acknowledged externally, with the lips alone, and without the submission of the heart, it was then that we were speaking of nominal Christianity, of what today we would call nominal Catholicism.

Today's gospel passage challenges and invites us, Christ's disciples today, as it did the first disciples, to receive Christ's authority into our inmost being, into the most secret parts of our mind, into the most hidden desires of our heart. It is important that we understand that in accepting Christ's authority into our lives, this is not a matter of granting some external control of our lives to Christ Jesus; but rather it is one of our accepting into our hearts and lives the unconditional love that Christ Jesus has for each of us, as our rule of life, as that which shapes the way we try to live our daily lives. You might be thinking that this sounds very difficult, quite a challenge, almost impossible, because we are weak and sinful.

But this afternoon, as we gather again in this Cathedral, let's recall and ask God's ongoing help on the baptism we received at the Easter Vigil or on the desire we expressed then to become a full member of the Roman Catholic Church. In your baptism you gave your life to Christ Jesus, and you accepted his authority in your life and in your actions. As a result, your life has been transformed: you are now a disciple of Christ Jesus, one who shares in his Risen life and who has accepted him as your Saviour; you have become a beloved son or daughter of God our Father. In the Sacrament of Confirmation, many of you who were baptised or who were received into full communion with the Catholic Church, received the permanent gift of God's Holy Spirit to guide and encourage you, to inspire and to help you to accept the authority of Christ Jesus in your daily life.

You, and all of us here this afternoon, will find it easier to respond to the ongoing guidance and promptings of the Holy Spirit in our lives if we recall why the Risen Christ Jesus invites and challenges us to place our lives under his authority. It is so that He may work in and through our lives, and empower and enable us to be his chosen instruments to share with others around us, through the manner of our lives, his love, his care for all people, his compassion and forgiveness. As he tells us today in the gospel passage, we are to be his witnesses in the world and we are called by him to make more disciples.

So we must not think of Christ's authority over us, as we would that of a boss exercising authority over us. Unlike that human boss, Christ does not issue orders to be obeyed, but rather he has made known to us, in the teaching of the gospel, how he invites us to live, not simply out of our own strength and gifts and talents. No, he offers us in baptism, and again in Confirmation, the

gift of the abiding presence of his Holy Spirit in our hearts, so that we, like his first disciples, can be helped to accept into our daily lives his authority, his power and his grace.

At the time of his Ascension, of his return to his Father, the Risen Jesus promised, and has kept that promise, that he would not leave his followers all alone; that, through his gift to us of the abiding presence of his Holy Spirit, he would help and guide our lives, our words and our actions; that we would experience the powerful assistance of his authority in our lives. There is nothing therefore that the Lord asks of us in our lives that he doesn't also enable us to respond to, through the guidance of his Holy Spirit. So, as St Paul teaches us, 'no-one can say, Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit.

So, I pray that you are all beginning to feel more at home as Catholics, more at home within your parishes, that you are being supported and encouraged in your faith and that, as time goes by, you may wish to get actively involved in some aspect of the life of your parish community. But today, just one week before the Solemn Feast of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit transformed the lives of the grieving, shattered and frightened first disciples of Jesus, let us take a moment in silent prayer, to accept afresh the authority of Christ in our lives as our Lord and Saviour, and to pray for a renewal of the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit.