

This weekend we are celebrating the solemnity of the Ascension. Sometimes the solemnities associated with the lives of Jesus and Mary can be hard for us to relate to—or at least they sometimes are for me. Jesus is God and Mary is the Immaculate Conception; those are pretty hard standards for us to live up to. What can we learn from the Ascension of Jesus?

As we heard twice in the readings, Jesus gave the Apostles some last minute instructions and then rose up into heaven on a cloud. How can we apply that to our lives? Jesus wasn't the only one who rode up on the clouds in these readings...he took us with him. In a sermon on the Ascension, Saint Leo the Great—Pope Leo I who died in the year 461—said that when we commemorate the Ascension, we are celebrating the day on which our poor human nature was carried up, in Christ, to the very throne of God the Father.

What did Leo mean? I'm going to put this as simply as I can. Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. His human nature cannot be separated from his divine nature. When he rose up to heaven, he took our humanity with him and restored it to the place where God originally intended it to be. When Jesus ascended into heaven, our human nature went with him. This is the reason why even in dark times we can have hope and joy. Death doesn't get the final word; we have a place reserved for us in heaven because Jesus redeemed us and made a place for us.

But...reservations can be cancelled. God won't cancel our reservation—he wants us in heaven with him. But we can cancel the reservation by sinning, or at least we can make it very difficult to show up and claim our spot. This is why in Luke's account of the Ascension, the focus is on repentance and forgiveness of sins. Matthew and Mark's Ascension accounts refer to the importance of baptism. Mark's account says that those who are baptized and believe will be saved, whoever does not believe will be condemned. Jesus' Ascension gives us the possibility of heaven, but it doesn't eliminate the possibility of hell. Jesus' death on the cross redeemed us of our sins—he paid the price for us; but our salvation—our spot in heaven—is still a work in progress.

Heaven, hell...the third option is purgatory. Someone asked me not too long ago, do we still believe in purgatory? Yes we do. If you go to Purgatory, it means you are on your way to heaven, you just need to get cleaned up first. Nothing impure can come into the presence of God. Purgatory is the state in which whatever would keep us away from God is purified out of us. Purgatory is a transitional state. Heaven and hell are eternal. Someone else recently asked me if it made more sense to aim for purgatory instead of heaven. NO!!! If you are

aiming for purgatory and you miss the target, you won't like where you end up. Purgatory is layover, not a final destination; we shouldn't be trying to go there.

We all know people who have died and we wonder where they ended up—eternally speaking. We can't say. The only people we can say anything about are the canonized saints—the ones officially declared as saints by the church. We don't know anybody else's fate; it's why we continue to pray for the dead. It's why we never stop praying for the people in our lives who struggle with their faith or have given up their faith. The divine mercy revelations to Saint Faustina lead us to believe that God never stops calling us back to himself. It's entirely possible that even the most unrepentant sinner, in the last moments of life, might experience conversion. God might make that person an offer he or she can't refuse and they will be saved.

If that seemed like a strange direction to take on Ascension Sunday...what did Jesus say in the first reading? He said that it isn't for us to know the timing and seasons; he wants us to focus on the job he has given us which is to be his witnesses. The uncertainty about times and seasons also means that we need to be prepared. We prepare by examining our consciences, by seeking forgiveness for ourselves and by being willing to forgive others. Jesus has prepared the way for us to get to heaven. There's a place waiting for each one of us. If we allow him, and cooperate with him, he will help us get there.