

Last weekend, Jesus said “If you love me you will keep my commandments.” Today, as we celebrate the Ascension, we heard his final commandments. In the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Luke records three commandments, even if they aren’t stated in explicit commandment form: 1—Go wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes. 2—Don’t worry about times and seasons. 3—After you receive the Holy Spirit, be my witnesses to all of the world.

Go wait in Jerusalem. Last weekend I mentioned patterns—here is another one. There are several references in the scriptures about Jesus going off by himself to pray, especially before major decisions or events. If Jesus did that, his disciples need to do the same thing and that includes us. It is through prayer with quiet hearts open to the promptings of the Holy spirit that God speaks to us and nudges us in the direction of his will. So wait and pray.

Don’t worry about times and seasons. Even after everything they had seen and heard from Jesus before and after his passion, death, and resurrection, the apostles were still hanging on to the idea of the restoration of the royal kingdom of David. Jesus didn’t give them a specific date, instead he changed their focus and helped them to see the bigger scope of His Father’s will. The disciples were going to receive God’s power, not to exercise political authority but to be his witnesses. And the testimony they would give was not about Israel as a nation but about God’s saving authority over all nations. This commandment also has a practical lesson for us. How much time do we spend worrying about things which are outside of our control? Or how often do we fail to recognize or refuse to act when the opportunity presents itself? I will come back to this in a little while.

Be my witnesses. This is pretty much the same commandment given at the end of Matthew’s gospel: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Being witnesses means publicly and authentically living out our faith. That doesn’t mean being obnoxious about it—remember what Saint Peter said last weekend: always be ready to give an explanation for the reason for your hope but do it with gentleness, reverence, and with a clear conscience. There is also a quote attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi although there is some debate over whether or not he actually said it: Preach the gospel at all times; use words when necessary. If we aren’t using words to preach the gospel, how are we doing it? The manner in which we live our lives. Not just on the surface but in everything we do.

After giving these commandments, Jesus ascended. What does that mean? He didn't just go away into the clouds somewhere. That may have been what the disciples saw but actually the ascension is Jesus going to a higher plane of existence where he is sitting next to his father in a position of power and is "in charge". It means that He holds the world, the Church, history, and each one of us in His hands. This position is rightfully His because by His loving self-offering on the Cross He defeated the powers of Sin, Death and Satan who had held the world captive since that dark day in the Garden of Eden.

From our perspective, does it really look like Jesus is in charge? Wars continue, people do wicked things, we all still struggle with sin and selfishness, people get sick and die and so much more. That is the way it seems now but there will come a day—the day on which Jesus returns in glory—when all of that bad stuff will end. In the meantime, perhaps we need to dig a little deeper into the words of the angels who appeared after Jesus' ascension: "Why are you standing there looking up at the sky?" Many theologians going all the way back to at least Saint Augustine have commented on that question and have understood it as meaning: "It is time for you to get to work." It is time for us to help make the kingdom of heaven a reality here on earth, even if it is in a very imperfect way. How do we do that? To start with, every single one of us should know and put into practice at least one corporal or spiritual work of mercy. A simple internet search will tell you what those are, if you don't already know them. How are we participating in those? Each of us needs to find at least one of them and put it into practice—chances are we are probably already doing these, we just need to be more intentional about it and be more intentional about asking the Holy Spirit to enter into those works.

Although Jesus doesn't need our help, he wants our help. And he promised to be with us every step of the way. That is how, working with Jesus, who is with us always with us, we can begin to turn our homes, community, and nation into the kingdom of God.