

06/01/14 Ascension A

-- One of my favorite songs from “the Boss” Bruce Springsteen is *Glory Days*. Those of you who remember it know that he sings about people who live in the past, reliving things such as their athletic exploits in high school, when, for example, they captained the team.

-- As the boss says, those glory days will pass you by in the blink of a young girl’s eye. We can’t live in the past, as tempting as that may be at times. I have to face the fact that I can’t run as fast as I could when I was 30 years old, as much as I wish I could.

-- Jesus’ apostles and other followers faced similar a temptation. They had been content following Jesus and being in his presence. They had great things in mind for him (and for themselves as well).

-- His crucifixion had been a shock to them, and they were in fear. When he appeared to them they were overjoyed in his presence, but they kept themselves locked up when he left. Jesus sensed they should not become “addicted” to his physical presence.

-- His ascension was a moment for them to let go of the old ways. But it wasn’t a moment of abandonment. Jesus assured his followers that God would continue to be with them through the power of the Holy Spirit.

-- Jesus had blessed the apostles with his physical presence, and that would be a good memory for them. But his most important gift to them was his abiding presence through the power of the Spirit.

-- His ascension challenged them to stop clinging to memories and to get on with God’s work in the world, knowing God’s life would be with them. Nowhere is that clearer than in Jesus’ commission to them as he leaves the earth in Matthew’s gospel.

-- Jesus sends them out to the peoples around them, and eventually to all peoples. They are to carry on his work. They are to look forward, not backward. And they are assured that God is present with them.

-- That work took a while to get going. It began in Jerusalem and moved slowly out from there. Even by the time Matthew's gospel was written, over 50 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, they had only scratched the surface of the then-known world.

-- We inherit that commission in our early 21st century world. We are called to look forward, not backward. God has work for us to do today, and God is present through the Holy Spirit in that work.

-- Some Catholics are tempted to look back to the so-called "glory days." Among some (even young people) there's a nostalgia for the 1950's, when churches were full and everyone knew their place.

-- Others hang back until the Church, in their minds, decides to "get with the times" and adapt, almost uncritically, to the modern world. They seem to desire a church which simply doesn't exist.

-- God calls us to look to the present, to see how we can spread the message of the gospel today in the concrete circumstances of our lives. We cannot be held hostage to a glorified past or a fantasy future. Our mission is right here, right now.

-- But we are not alone in this mission. The power of the Holy Spirit is still present in the world. In fact, it is present in each and every one of us.

-- If we truly believe this, we will go out of here ready to do God's work, conscious of the blessings he's given us in the past, but ready to face the present task.

-- For he promised to be with us until the end of the age. And—contrary to what some TV preachers say—the end of the age has not arrived yet.