

The Ascension of the Lord: Taking on the snakes and poisons of the world.

(The Diocese of St. Petersburg follows the recommendations of the USCCB and celebrates the Ascension on what would be the 7th Sunday of Easter.)

"These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. They will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." Mark 16:17-18

In some of the rural communities of our countries, ministers and their congregations take this passage literally. As a test of faith some will plunge their hands into a box of rattlesnakes, pull one out and hold it in front of the congregation. Others will drink strychnine poison. Some will survive. Some will be bitten by the rattlers. Some will die from the poison. Now these simple rural communities view the survivors as positive examples of the faith of the entire community. They view those who are bit by the snakes or who die from the poison as examples of the weakness of the community's faith.

They are all wrong in interpreting Jesus' words literally. He doesn't want us to challenge Him to heal us, nor does He want us to put ourselves in unnecessary peril. But they are correct in recognizing that faith in Jesus gives them the ability to conquer the evils of the world. And their communities are right when they credit success on the Lord and see failure as a result of lack of faith.

Still, let me say a word about literal interpretations of the Bible. This form of fundamentalism demands that every word, every statement be believed exactly as it is written and read. These interpretations often get so bogged down in the details that they miss the point of the message. Let me give you an example. A young Mom takes her six year old to the beach. The mom keeps an eye on the little one playing in the water, when suddenly the child calls out, "Shark, Shark!" Mom runs into the water to protect the child, and the child just starts laughing. "This is not funny," Mom thinks, "I need to impress upon him that it is wrong to call for help when you don't need it." So she tells the child the story of the boy who called wolf. You remember, the boy was a shepherd watching sheep and bored. So he called wolf to get the attention of the townsfolk. Then he laughed when they came running, all concerned. He did this twice. The people came both times, but were furious that he was playing a bad joke. Then the boy really did see a wolf. He called for help again, only this time no one listened and he and the flock were attacked. Now, Mom tells this story to the six year old to impress upon him the importance of only calling for help when it is needed. That is the point of the story. What was the boy's name? What color was his hair? In what county did he live? Anything particular about the shepherd is not important. It is easy to miss the point of the story if we are bogged down in the incidentals.

What was the message that Jesus was giving when He spoke about the signs of

those who believed? The message was that His people could fight and conquer evil in its worst forms. Jesus used snakes to represent the devil. His followers, those who believe in Him, could take on and beat off the devil. He used poison to represent the evil of the world, not just a poisonous potion, but the poison that is hatred, the poison that is materialism, prejudice, alcoholism, the drug culture, the sex culture, and on and on. Jesus said that His followers would be able to take on the poison of the world and defeat it.

Then He ascended into heaven. Peter and the boys didn't grieve that Jesus was gone. Mary Magdalene and the girls didn't resume their crying. No, they were too busy. Instead, they got to work and proclaimed the wonders and the beauties of Jesus's life. The devil went after them in full battle array. He tortured them, and convinced others to expel them from their communities. He talked others into killing them. But the devil didn't win. He couldn't stop the work of the Kingdom of God. The followers of Jesus beat off the snake. All the evil of the world went to war against them. The poisons that destroy the soul, that destroy life attacked them. The Christians didn't go into hiding. They took on the poison of the world and found a life free of evil, a life of meaning, the Christian life.

Jesus ascends to heaven and then says to us: "Get to work. Fight off the snake, the devil. Fight off poisons of the world. You can win these victories. You can win them because I really haven't left you. I am with you. My spirit, the Holy Spirit, strengthens you.

We all have poisons that we have to fight off in our lives. We all have our own demons. Some are of our own making. Some are imposed upon us by others or by situations beyond our control. One person wages a continual battle against alcohol. Another against drugs. One is fighting to be in a Christian relationship with his girlfriend or her boyfriend. Another is fighting against his or her own selfishness. One must deal with the fact that her family is not what it should be. Another is suffering the terror of abuse. One has physical challenges, another has psychological challenges. All these and so many other demons and poisons of the world attack us, but they can't beat us down. We will win against the evil of the world because we have the greatest weapon there ever was. We possess Jesus Christ.

Jesus ascends into heaven and assumes His place as Lord of heaven and earth. What does that mean, "Lord". It means that He has the power to win, to beat off evil. It means that He is in control. He is our Lord. He is the one who fights for us and with us.

In sports and in life the best defense is a good offense. When Jesus ascended into heaven, His followers went on offense. They didn't cower in a room, afraid of what the enemies of God's kingdom would do to them. Instead, they took the battle to the devil. The gospel puts this so simply: *They went forth and preached everywhere,* People who would never leave their villages except to travel to Jerusalem, journeyed throughout the world to wage the battle of the Kingdom. They preached everywhere.

That's what we are all called to do. We are called to take the battle to the enemy. We are called to combat moral evil wherever it exists, within us and around us. We are called to give people the Gospel, the good News. The Good News is this: there is a much better life than the one the world paints as ideal. There is a life where every action has meaning. There is a life of fulfillment. This life is the life of the Lord. That's the Good News. Life is infinitely better when it is lived united to Jesus Christ.

Snakes will attack. Poison will be forced down our throats. But we, the people of the Ascended Lord will beat it all off. How? Well, the gospel explains how in its last words: *the Lord worked with them and confirmed the Word.*

We don't wage this war alone. We fight with the might of the Lord Jesus Christ. And with Him on our side, how can we possibly lose?