

## St. Mark

I take as my text today from St. Paul's Letter to the Church at Ephesus:

***(Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.)***

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.*

Today, we celebrate the Feast of St. Mark who is undoubtedly, at least by most accounts, the author of the Gospel bearing his name. He is also credited with establishing the Church in Egypt, being the first bishop of the Church of Alexandria. Of his martyrdom, we are uncertain, but his remains are said to rest under the high altar in St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice.

Some of what we know about Mark is this:

We know him in the New testament as John Mark, a cousin of St. Barnabas.

While he was not actually a follower of Jesus at the time, Mark is assumed to have been there when Jesus was arrested and was a witness to some of the events of Holy week. In St. Mark's Gospel, he depicts a young man running away naked when Jesus is taken into custody. That young man is supposed to have been Mark.

Mark was the son of a wealthy woman of Jerusalem named Mary whose house was used as a church and which became a Christian center. It is thought that St. Peter lodged there on occasion and that Mark was one of his converts.

On their first missionary journey, St. Paul and St. Barnabas took Mark along as a ministerial assistant; but Mark soon left the two to return home, seemingly leading to a rift between Paul and Barnabas.

Why Mark left is still up to discussion: some think it was because of the way he perceived Paul in the treatment of Barnabas; others believe it was strictly a desire to return home to be with his mother.

Nevertheless, over time the differences were healed, and we find St. Paul later referring to Mark as *profitable to me for ministering* when he wrote to Timothy asking him to bring Mark with him when he came to Rome.

According to ecclesiastical tradition, Mark is best known as a companion to St. Peter. Versed in Latin and Greek, he was Peter's interpreter, as the Apostle was not very good at either of those languages.

Papias, writing about the year 130, tells us that Mark recorded all the things he remembered about St. Peter's teaching and preaching although he did not write down in order the things that Christ said or did. Papias also stated that Mark *committed no error, as he wrote down some particulars just as he had recalled them to mind.*

While it seems apparent that today's passage from St. Paul's Letter to the Church at Ephesus was chosen because of its mention of *evangelists* when listing the ministries given to his Church by Jesus Christ, there is one portion of the Epistle passage that stands out, as we have noted, the parenthetical section that reads:

*(Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.)*

Paul had been talking about the qualities of the members of Christ's Church and begins to address the functions of the members of the Church when he introduces as an aside a significant element of our Faith, the concept of the Trinity, Jesus Christ as pre-existing and returning to the Heavens from whence He came.

In declaring the functions of the members of the Church, Paul describes them as gifts given by a conquering king quite in contrast to the historical role of a conqueror in the Old Testament and also in contrast to the way God has been depicted in the Old Testament. By that, both expected gifts, or tribute, to be given to them, not the other way around.

In the Old Testament, man gave gifts and made sacrifices to God, whereas in the New Testament, it is God giving gifts to mankind. In the Old Testament, a jealous God demands that tribute be paid; in the New Testament, a loving God pours out his love to all his creation.

In quoting from Psalm 68, verse 18, Paul apparently becomes caught up by the word *ascended* and is for a moment diverted in thought.

The meaning is clear to him: the Jesus Christ who descended and trod the earth as a man is the one and same Jesus Christ who ascended to the glory of Heaven where he continues to seek out all sinners, to love all people, to heal all who suffer, to comfort the sorrowing, to be a friend of the outcast.

More importantly, Jesus did not ascend to Heaven to leave the world; rather he ascended so that he could fill the world with his Presence.

While on earth in bodily form, our Lord was subject to the limitations of the body; but when he laid his Body aside and ascended into Heaven, he was set free from the body's limitations; he could be everywhere in the world at once through his Spirit.

Here St. Paul offers to us the realization that the Ascension meant not a Christ-deserted world but a Christ-filled world.

For each of us in Christ, there is an office, whether we be preachers, teachers, ministers, or worshippers, whatever our function within the Church, we contribute to the strengthening of its fabric so that its members may attain to nothing less than perfection in Christ.

In a sense, each of us as Christians shares in being shepherds to other Christians. The grace and the strength to fulfill our individual responsibilities as Christians, indeed, to be shepherds; the grace and strength for the Church to fulfill its mission in the world comes through the spiritual presence of Christ in the world which could not result except by his Ascension to Heaven.

St. Paul, in this brief Epistle passage, has given us a wonderful vision of our Lord: The Ascending Conqueror, entering into the Glory of Heaven and by this Glorious Ascension, Jesus Christ becomes a fulfilling Spiritual Presence in the world.

He fills each of us with his Grace and Righteousness, with his Spirit, with the fruits of his Spirit, and with his abounding Love. He fills us with spiritual knowledge and understanding, with peace, joy, and comfort; and with his Presence, he fills us and all his Church with the gifts and graces suitable to our several callings.