

Sermon: 2021/05/09 (ASCENSION/6th Sunday of Easter, Year B) - Acts 1:6-11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:15-23; &, Luke 24:44-53_BTR

[White balloon; tank of helium; large, black sharpie.]

Kids' Talk: The Ascension

[Invite children to the front.]

Jesus had done it.

He had done *everything* necessary that you and me and people like us can enjoy 'abundant', eternal life.

And so, having (successfully) completed His impossible mission, He was ready to go back home:

So, He led His disciples out to a deserted spot, and commanded them to evangelise the *whole* world - to build the Church by spreading the Good News about His sacrifice and resurrection.

[Draw a stick-man onto the balloon.]

And then this is where the story gets *really* weird, *Luke* tells us that He disappeared 'up' into the sky to 'Heaven': [Lk. 24:51].

[Let the balloon go.]

That's it!!

That's how the story ends.

Jesus travelled 'up' to Heaven.

So, is 'Heaven', then, 'up' there somewhere?

Yes and no.

Is it among the clouds? [see: Acts 1:9b].

But then why don't we see it when we're travelling in an airplane?!

Is 'Heaven' on the moon?

No.

Because we can't see it in our telescopes.

Is it in "deep space" - on an alien world? With a silly name like - I don't know, "Kolob."

No.

You see, although Jesus' direction of travel was initially in the direction of all those things, 'Heaven' is somewhere *outside* of the world we can see and measure and experience.

It's somewhere *mysterious*.

It's where our holy, awesome God is...most "concentrated."

Which is exactly where Jesus - His holy and awesome son - belongs,

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Older PC on a wheeled computer-desk, and a CD-ROM with the word "GOSPEL" written on it in large letters.]

The Holy Spirit and Evangelism

Last week I told you that, when it comes to "evangelism" - that is to say, when it comes to telling others about the risen, reigning Christ and inviting them to believe the same through membership in a church-"family" - that the Trinity is on our "team."

(Remember I said that?)

And, today, I want to elaborate as to why.

Why we need their help.

In other words, I want to talk about *their* role in *our* Great Commission.

And, more specifically, I want us grow in our understanding *and appreciation* of the part played by the Holy Spirit. [Pause.]

Imagine, for a moment, that *you* were on the adjudicating panel trying the case of heresy brought against the Renaissance scientist, "Galileo."

It's April 1633: [n.1].

You're in Rome.

You're a member of (the monastic order of) the Dominicans; "*an inquisitor*;" feared and reviled throughout continental Europe.

You wear a black cloak over a creamy white robe.

Indeed, perhaps you're Cardinal Vincenzo Maculani, the chief prosecutor himself.

The court is in session.

You're meeting in the convent-Basilica of Santa Maria sopra Minerva.

The room is cool and elegant.

Tastefully decorated.

Galileo has been summoned before you (and your distinguished, clerical colleagues) for his vocal and public support of Copernicanism: which was a *radical, bold* idea that the sun and the other planets of the *Solar System* did *not* revolve around the earth, (which remained fixed in space, at its center), *but rather* - and you should brace yourselves for this; children might want to leave the room - that the *earth* did the "revolving."
This exotic, innovative suggestion is called the Heliocentric view.

Well, earlier, in 1616, Pope Gregory XV asked Galileo 'no[t] to teach it in any way', which is to say, asked him to refrain from *asserting* it to be true; he was, rather, to describe his position as merely an *hypothesis*. [n.2]
He was to say, if asked, that it was *un-proven*.
Just an opinion.

An...*optional* interpretation of appearances *among* various alternatives, and no more.

The traditional and prevailing idea at that time, of course - let's call it "the Ptolemaic" idea, (onto which Galileo was "throwing" some doubt), sprung from Aristotle, the greatest of all philosophers; and, additionally, it was felt in the Church that the account of creation contained in *Genesis* implied as much - that the earth was the point around which everything turned, though the text itself didn't demand such an interpretation.

(And does not.)

And that particular reading seemed to be confirmed by the fact that, looking around, the earth *wasn't* - *visibly* - rushing through the universe.

That, as the Psalmist sings - *and as our feet* seem to tell us, 'the world is established, firm and secure': [93:1, N. I. V.].

But the "traditional and prevailing idea" had given rise to some irresolvable puzzles for astronomers.

"Puzzles" that Galileo's support of Copernicanism promised to "put to rest."
But - and listen carefully to this, because we can make a similar error - the widely *assumed* implication of *Genesis* was *imagined* to be one and the same as the *actual* meaning of the Holy Scriptures, and so herein lay "the snag" - Galileo *appeared* to be contradicting *God*.

And that wouldn't do.

Gregory's replacement, Pope Urban the VIII, was, like Galileo, a Florentine and even also something of an early admirer. [n.3]

But Galileo overestimated the new pope's tolerance.

He mistook it for *permission* to publish a book ridiculing, *if subtly*, Ptolemaism, and Urban became 'incandescent with anger'. [n.4]

And so it was that Galileo found himself being confronted by agents of the Inquisition at his home in Tuscany.

It was a *terrifying* moment.

Like finding a *real* bogeyman hiding under the bed despite the assurances of your parents that he doesn't exist.

A nightmare-come-to-life;

a medieval "Gestapo" - *absolutely* the last people you wanted to come visiting.

Dutifully Galileo travelled across Italy for the hearing.

There was nowhere to run - *not* for a committed Catholic.

He wasn't tortured.

There was no need.

Galileo was old and frail: he wouldn't have survived it.

On the 22nd of June he was found guilty - the plainly written words of his book used against him, which was symbolically burned as he watched; and, as punishment, he was placed under permanent house arrest.

And that outcome surprises us, right?

It *shocks* us.

(The verdict.)

How could they?!

- What we take for granted as true about the universe and its motions should have been obvious, no?

"Should have been obvious" to the clergy that condemned Galileo.

After all, he presented them *with evidence*:

powerful telescopes of his own design and making, through which they could observe moons orbiting around Jupiter, demonstrating that "the heavens" were *not*, after all, orientated around us - as people had enjoyed thinking.^[n.5]

Why wasn't that *enough*?

Why didn't Galileo's critics believe what their *own* eyes revealed to them when they looked through his instruments?

Because we humans aren't purely rational creatures.

We're not calculators, though we are patently capable of some pretty impressive "calcula-tions."

We think: "Just give me the data and that's enough."

Yeah, right!

All around we see how people prefer fashion and fancy to facts.

All around we see supposed (cherished) "orthodoxies" being "flipped on their heads" and their utter opposite believed; their contradiction suddenly celebrated and proclaimed.

The problem is our "*fallenness*" -

The Bible teaches that the human will is *not* free.

Not *genuinely*.

We aren't God's puppets, we *do* choose, but what His inspired word reveals is that our *capacity* to (correctly) understand physics or theology - *or anything for that*

matter! is restrained;
it is circumscribed;
it is "*strangled*" by our "flesh" - by our our instincts and appetites.
Our ego and self-love.

Indeed, Paul the Apostle describes - in *Romans* (chapter) 7, how, in our *natural* state, our wills are actually held 'captive' - we can't properly and honestly assess ourselves or our history or our reality: [v.23].

And the consequence is that we'd rather be "*relevant*" than *right*.
Cool rather than Christian.

And this is a *terrible* impediment to the Gospel and the Kingdom:

By way of an analogy, picture the human mind like an older PC, specifically, the "tower" part, which normally sits on the floor or in a cubby:
when someone shares with a non-believer the Gospel, it is as if a new CD-ROM has been inserted into the computer's drive, so that a *brand new* program is ready to be launched.

Indeed, the "program" from the CD-ROM appears on the desktop, but it doesn't begin itself - it needs someone to actively select it by clicking the icon, right? Well, we need the Holy Spirit to operate the "mouse" in us.

So, I described to you last week our duty to tell people about the Empty Tomb, to call them to repentance in light of it, and lead "*born-again*" lives following Christ through a congregation like this one, but our audience - *whoever* they are - a spouse, a colleague - is fundamentally at a disadvantage to respond *appropriately* without God restoring to them the "*sight*"; the *clarity* to fully appreciate His love and intervention on the Cross.

This is a work; a *miracle* performed in them by the Spirit.

And we see Him doing this in our reading from *Acts* today:

notice how Peter preaches the Gospel; invites his listeners to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior and become a part of the Church, *and* the Spirit descends on them, and it is only *then* that there's a positive response, which Luke - the author, describes as 'extolling God.'

They couldn't do that without the 'Spirit of wisdom and revelation' mentioned in *Ephesians* this morning: [1:17].

To put it simply, evangelism - human effort - isn't sufficient in the matter of bringing others to Faith, and increasing the number of saints.

Thinking of the parable of the sower, what's needed - and this is my point - is for God to go *before* us to "prepare the ground."

- To open hearts and minds that *the evidence* of - and for - Christianity as the *Way* to Heaven and abundant life [see *Jn. 14:6*] might be heard and embraced.

So pray!

Pray for those who don't know Christ or care for His "*bride*" [gesture to the room]

that they might be ready to receive Him into their lives.

Footnotes:

1. See: Livio, Mario (2020), *Galileo: And the Science Deniers*, New York, N. Y.: Simon and Schuster, 183.
2. Næss, Atle (2005), *Galileo Galilei: When the World Stood Still*, Berlin: Springer, 118.
3. *Supra*.
4. Wootton, David (2013), *Galileo: Watcher of the Skies*, New Haven, C.T.: Yale University Press, 52.
5. Drake, Stillman (2001), *Galileo: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 48.