

Rev. Joseph Keating
Ascension of the Lord (A)
Homily

Today, forty-two days after Easter Sunday, we celebrate the Ascension of the Lord into Heaven. When I was a child, the Easter events of the Resurrection and Ascension were sort of conflated in my mind, and I didn't really understand the difference between them. The Resurrection, of course, is what we celebrated on Easter Sunday, when Jesus rose from the tomb in his glorified body. Then, for the next forty days, he appeared several times to his disciples, like the women, the Apostles, even the couple on the road to Emmaus. He appeared in Jerusalem as well as in Galilee. Then, after those forty days, he finally ascended into Heaven, rising up into the sky until the disciples could no longer see him. Nowadays, we are used to hearing about human beings in the sky, because we have airplanes, rockets, and the International Space Station. But at that moment, a human being ascending into the sky would have been an unprecedented marvel.

I suppose it could have happened differently. Jesus could have ridden a unicorn off into the sunset. He could have had a military parade and drove a tank thru down Main Street, Jerusalem. He could have been beamed up by a flying saucer or piloted the Technodrome into Dimension X.

But that is not Jesus' style. He came in humble form when he was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, born in a stable and laid in a manger. Our God took on our human nature. And in so doing, he elevated it. God has given mankind such a dignity by being the only created species that God actually was born into. We are the only species that God has redeemed and called to be heirs of his kingdom. We are the most dignified form of life, and the pinnacle of his creation. And we did not elevate ourselves, but God has chosen and elevated us to this great dignity. When he ascended into Heaven, he took our human nature with him.

It is easy to take our human dignity for granted, but it was not always so, and it may not always be so in the future. For there is another worldview that has been gaining popularity for the past few centuries called "secular humanism." Secular humanism is something that goes back, well before 1968 or even 1914. It is at least as old as the French Revolution, and the Enlightenment philosophers.

Secular humanism seeks to do away with God, religion, and Divine Revelation, and set up instead a utopian society where mankind makes its own moral rules and defines its own meaning of life. It is concerned with the natural needs of mankind in this present life, without concern or belief in life after death.

Many of the secular humanist ideals actually sound good to us, and they can very easily sneak their way into our schools, our speech and our family culture. We hear slogans all the time like, “Be a good person,” “Be better,” or “Be nice.” We also hear meaningless, tautological expressions like “It is what it is” or “Love is love.” You hear it shouted when someone is about to take a risk, “YOLO!” (You only live once). These expressions have gained particular popularity in Western culture, even in the 21st century, since they build upon the Christian foundations of human dignity, the law of love, and the invitation to eternal life.

When you hear about human dignity, this is a particularly Christian idea. It is Christian because Jesus has united our human nature to his divine nature, and they will never be separated. When you hear about love, realize that the standard for love has been set by Jesus Christ, who offered himself in sacrifice, even unto death out of love for us. When you hear that you only live once, it is because our souls are immortal, and Jesus has invited us to spend eternity with God. Our bodies, too, will become immortal when they rise on the Last Day and are rejoined to our souls.

This is our supernatural calling and our supernatural end. The only reason we can hope for it, and the only means by which we can achieve it, is thru Jesus Christ. He sets the standard, he shows us the way, and he will be our judge in the end.

The mistake of the secular humanist is to take all that belongs to Christ and to arrogate it for himself. Man sets his own meaning of life. Man paves his own way, and man judges himself. Just be a good person. Just be nice.

But our life’s goal is not just to be a good person, or to be nice. Jesus calls us to a much greater purpose than that. He offers us a new goal: to attain perfect happiness by being in union with God. In order to be in union with God, to dwell in the Father’s house, we have to go thru Jesus Christ. No one comes to the Father except thru him. He is the way, the truth and the life.

Since he is the way to Heaven, we must stay on the road. That means we must remain in him. And the way we remain in him is to love him. The way to love him is to keep his commandments. And his commandment is this: love one another as he has loved us.

What is love? Love is doing the best for the other person, regardless of what it costs you. It is to give yourself away sacrificially for others, even to the point of being forgetful of oneself.

Contrast this with the secular humanist goal, “be a good person.” This is a self-referential goal. It sounds innocent enough, “be a good person.” But what is good? What does it mean to be a good person? Who gets to define what good is? Is there some objective standard of goodness, or is it up to each of us to define for ourselves? Herein lies the danger. In our relativistic modern world, we are tempted to define what is good for ourselves. To do this, we often look inside ourselves, to our own desires, rather than looking outside to a transcendent God who is Goodness itself. Thus, “to be a good person” ends up meaning something like, “to do whatever I decide is good for me, and to do it to the greatest extent possible.” This is a self-centered and lonely way thru life. When we stay focused on ourselves, we find that we have little time or energy to love others.

Let’s take the other secular humanist goal, to “be nice.” Being nice means that we do whatever it takes to avoid conflict. I used to work under a store manager at a pharmacy, and when I was about to be transferred there, I asked the other regional store managers, “What is this guy like?” They all answered, “Oh, him? Uh, he’s a nice guy.” Well, turns out he was such a nice guy that he couldn’t handle tough decisions and hard conversations. Like the time when he fired one of his employees without telling her, then left for the weekend. That meant that it was up to me to give her the bad news. She was heartbroken. The situation was so much worse because the “nice guy” manager decided to avoid the conflict instead of facing it.

Now, I am certainly NOT telling you, “don’t be nice—be a jerk instead.” That would be to overcorrect from one vice to another. Instead, contrast the secular humanist goal, “be nice” with the Christian fruits of the Holy Spirit: viz., kindness and gentleness. Kindness and gentleness do not mean mere conflict avoidance,

but rather thoughtfulness, patience and mercy. It means don't be like a bull in a china shop.

Or we could contrast "be nice" with the Beatitude, "Blessed are the Meek." Meekness does not mean being a pushover or a doormat. It does not mean be a nice guy. It means to use your strength appropriately. Be courageous and strong when defending the weak. But also, be restrained in exercising power so as not to harm others. Don't be a hammer in search of a nail.

Jesus has joined our human nature to the Godhead. Humanity has been elevated beyond our wildest imagination. We are invited to reign forever with God. This is our supernatural end. And we will realize it by receiving and showing love for God and our neighbor, in this life and in eternity.

Today, don't just be nice—be kind.
Be neither a pushover nor a bully—be meek.
Don't just be a good person—be a Saint.