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Homily at Mass Ascension of the Lord, Year C – 2 June 2019

All of us, young and old, can easily explain what today's feast of the Ascension of Jesus is about in no more than four words: Jesus ascended into Heaven – he physically rose up from the earth and hidden by clouds he entered into Heaven to take his place at the right hand of his Father.

Does this mean however that Jesus is gone from us – he is nowhere to be found on earth, he has left us to ourselves to organize the Church, to pray and to live Christian life, to work out our own way, our own path to Heaven?

The answer, of course, is no. In the moment of his Ascension Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will come – we will celebrate this momentous event next Sunday, the feast of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is at home in each one of us: he sustains our hope, he gives us courage, he helps us to pray, he stirs up in us every motivation to be good parents, apostles of mercy and charity, faithful to Sunday Mass. As he is lifted up, St Luke notes that Jesus raised his hands in blessing. This is how Jesus stands at the Father's right hand: his hands extended, just as they are on the Cross, so that you and I live in the shelter of his blessing, the Church is sheltered, protected by Christ's powerful arms. In the words of one of the psalms, we stand in the shelter of the Most High, we abide in his shadow always.

Let's count the ways that the risen and ascended Christ is with us always:

1. Here in the Church we feel the close presence of Jesus: he is with us now in our parish family gathered by God in his House: parents and children, young and old, priest and people. "Where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, I am there with them". Jesus speaks to us as the Word of God is proclaimed and preached. The priest conveys to us the presence of Christ especially when he stands at the Altar. And in the gift of Holy Communion we receive Christ: his Body and Blood, the crucified and Risen Lord, our food, our life, the taste of Heaven!
2. You and I also experience Christ's presence in each of the Sacraments. In Baptism Christ acts to welcome new members into his family, his Church. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation Jesus is there, his arms outstretched, the Good Shepherd, who rescues and saves his sheep and lambs. In the Sacrament of Marriage Jesus binds in love a man and woman, blessing them with his love and the gift of children. We see Christ in our bishops and priests. And the elderly and sick treasure Christ's blessing, peace and healing in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

3. Pope Francis speaks of the Church – the local parish – as a field hospital in the midst of a war zone. Jesus founded the Church to be his community, his family, his Holy People in the world – the Church is the tangible, visible, knowable presence of the Kingdom of God everywhere on earth. When we look at the Church we see the Pope, the bishops, the priests. We see buildings – our churches, schools, hospitals. When we look closer we see our homes and families. And closer again we see people – all of us at prayer and worship now; many lay faithful active in St Vincent de Paul, Legion of Mary, initiatives that support and promote life, the welfare of children, the disabled and handicapped, single parent families, indigenous Australians, and countless hidden works of kindness, goodness and friendship offered by neighbours and parishioners everywhere. In all these different ways the Church shines light, and works as salt and yeast, to preserve and to raise up our society – our local communities – to be everything God wants our world to be.

St Matthew tells us that Jesus told his disciples at his Ascension: Go out – teach – preach – baptise. This is the mission of the Church. This has been the Church’s mission from the start. Archbishop Comensoli wants every parish in Melbourne to be alive, active, faith-filled, missionary. No parish can kick back and simply relax, or wait to turn out the lights after everyone else has left. The Gospel is Good News to be lived. The Gospel is Good News of joy. The Gospel is Good News: Jesus the Saviour Crucified, Risen, Ascended, is with us – now, always.