The Feast of the Ascension 2025

The right book and the right words from a great author can make a real difference in life. While books don't exactly change life, they can provide different perspectives.

One book, which left a lasting impression on me, I read when I was a student in training for the priesthood. It was a novel, by Graham Greene, entitled “The Power and the Glory”. He set in Mexico in the early twentieth century, a time when the Mexican Government was attempting to suppress Catholicism, and many priests were “on the run”.

Initially, I was reluctant to read Greene’s novel but was encouraged to do so by one of my priest lecturers. My hesitation was based on my judgement of the principal character in the story, an old priest – a judgement based perhaps on youthful zeal, as well as on a certain of lack of experience.

The details of the novel I remember in a general sense, but a few sentences have fixed themselves in my heart. The principal character, the old priest, was “a whiskey priest”, in other words an alcoholic; he also had had an affair with a local woman and fathered a daughter; indeed, he had been anything but a fervent minister of the gospel.

In the novel, the fugitive priest pursued by a fanatical police officer, is eventually captured, and sentenced to death. On the morning of his execution, the old priest woke up filled with sorrow, and, as the novel relates, “Tears poured down his face; he was not....afraid of damnation....He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed. It seemed to him at that moment, that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage.”

It is claimed that “at the end of life we will be judged on love”. The old priest, in Greene's novel, having failed to love, had missed his opportunities to become a saint! The right words from a great author can make a significant difference in life and can provide different perspectives on life – Graham Greene’s novel does this – at least it did for me!

Today’s feast of the Ascension, reminds us that the Lord Jesus, having *“finished the work the Father sent him to do” (cf Jn.17:4)*, commissioned his disciples to be messengers of the Gospel of love. He said to them*, “Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation.”*

There was an urgency in the proclamation; which is why, after the Lord’s Ascension, *“two men in white”,* angels perhaps, challenged the disciples, *“Why are you men of Galilee standing here looking into the sky?”* We too are challenged: don't waste your opportunities; be messengers of the Gospel of love! None of us would wish “to go to God empty-handed.”

At the Last Supper Jesus said to his disciples *“Do this in memory of me”* *(Lk.22:19) and* entrusted himself to his disciples' memory; in each Mass he entrusts himself to our memory. Memory is the door of the heart. Ordinary human experience teaches us that the memory of a loved one floods the heart, moves us to love. It is also true that when we forget, or neglect, loves withers and dies.

Remembering Jesus is the proper activity for a Christian*.* When we open our hearts to the memory of Jesus, then, in the words of St. Paul, *“Love for Christ overwhelms us” (2Cor.5:14).* Remembering him we love him.

We become saints by loving Jesus. But that is more than merely saying *“Lord, Lord,”* - it is doing the Father's will and keeping his commandments *(cf Mt.7:21).* When we love another person – a husband, wife, child, parent, friend – we show that love by the way we act towards the person, and by what we do for the person; as scripture says, *“our love must not just be words or mere talk, but something active and genuine” (1Jn.3:18).*

Unless we are prepared to faithfully do the *“Father's will”* our prayers become mere pious platitudes! We pray in the Lord's Prayer, *“Thy will be done”*, that is, in me, through me, and by me!

Fidelity to God's will, like fidelity in all relationships, is most often in the ordinary, rather than in the dramatic, events of life. The ordinary is that which the Irish poet, Patrick Kavanagh, describes as “the bits and pieces of everyday”. One of the great saints said, “Faithfulness in little things is a big thing.” *(cf St. John Chrysostom)*

The title of Greene’s novel is an allusion to the response in the Mass which comes after the Lord's Prayer, “For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever”.

At the end of Mass, we are urged, “Go and proclaim the Gospel of the Lord” – to go, and to become saints by being Christ's witnesses in our society. By being Christ’s face, his helping hands, his loving and encouraging voice, we magnify his power and glory.

*“Lord,*

*remembering you we love you,*

*and in loving you we are assured*

*that we will not go to you empty-handed!”*  **Amen.**