

Ascension Day (C)

8th May 2016

Amoris Laetitia ch. 1

Acts 1: *He was lifted up while they looked on ...*

Eph 1: *the strength of His power at work in Christ*

Lk 24: 46-53: *He withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven*

There's so much to draw our attention at this time of the Church's year. Obviously, today is the feast of the Ascension — a great moment in the history of salvation as Jesus returns to heaven in the flesh He had assumed: taking our bodily nature into His Father's dwelling. It's also, of course, the beautiful month of May, month of special devotion to our Blessed Lady. Both of these things could be very good and fruitful for spiritual reflection. But, as I think you know, I wish in these coming weeks to spend time instead exploring with you the riches of *Amoris Laetitia*, the Pope's recent 'apostolic exhortation' on love in Christian Marriage and Family Life. It's a long document of 9 chapters, and is the summing-up by Pope Francis of a long sequence of listening to the world's Catholics and of debate and reflection by two successive synods of bishops, the past two autumns. Each week I will take a chapter, and attempt to give you the essence of what Pope Francis has to

say to us in this very special document. I've also provided you with the Newsletter today a superb overview of *Amoris Laetitia* written by the bishop of Portsmouth.

Chapter 1 is a beautiful survey of the theme of marital love throughout Sacred Scripture. In many ways, the Bible reads as one long love story from start to finish, God pouring out His love unceasingly on His sometimes unworthy and unfaithful people. The Pope writes:

The Bible is full of families, births, love stories and family crises. This is true from its very first page, with the appearance of Adam and Eve's family with all its burden of violence but also its enduring strength, to its very last page, where we behold the wedding feast of the Bride and the Lamb. — A.L. n. 8

It is no surprise, then, that the Scripture has much to teach us about love, marriage and the family, since God has accompanied His people with great love, as a father, or even as a lover, throughout biblical history.

The Pope quotes, at the start of His reflections, a touching psalm which reminds us that marriage and family life form the core of God's plan for mankind:

Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways! You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands; you

shall be happy, and it shall go well with you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots round your table. Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord. The Lord bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life! May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel! (Ps 128) — A.L. n. 8.

Already, then, in this ‘hymn of hope’ we see the ‘domestic Church’ coming to the fore. The family is not irrelevant to the plan of God, but is precisely the place where husband and wife live out a life of love and make a home that is a holy place. The family is willed by God, based on the faithful love of a man and a woman bound together in the committed love of marriage. From the very beginning of the book of Genesis, God “made them male and female”, and the union of man and woman — “the two shall become one flesh” — is the basis of family and society as God teaches us. But more than that, as the Pope explains,

The couple that loves and begets life is a true, living icon ... capable of revealing God the Creator and Saviour. ... the couple’s fruitful relationship becomes an image for understanding and describing the mystery of God himself, for in the Christian vision of the Trinity, God is contemplated as Father, Son and Spirit of love. The triune God is a communion of love, and the family is its living reflection. — A.L. n. 11.

How exalted a vision, then, is this Jewish/Christian vision of the family? We are meant, as families living the faith, not to be mediocre, but to encapsulate as a living image, the love of God Himself. The heart of family life should be a love which aims at being as passionate, self-giving, constant and creative as that which God is. Children are a natural desire of marriage, and to deliberately and completely exclude children from a marriage is seen as unnatural: they bring energy and vitality to a marriage and to a home.

Pope Francis acknowledges the many challenges that arise in Scripture to families of the Bible, from sin — domination and disputes, exile and violence. Suffering is present even to the Holy Family, and the Pope reminds us of all that Jesus underwent even in His early life, fleeing persecution. His 1st chapter ends with these moving words:

Every family should look to the icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Its daily life had its share of burdens and even nightmares, as when they met with Herod’s implacable violence. This last was an experience that, sad to say, continues to afflict the many refugee families who in our day feel rejected and helpless. ... Like Mary, they are asked to face their family’s challenges with courage and serenity, in good times and bad, and to keep in their heart the great things which God has done. — A.L. n. 30.