**Sunday of the 1st Ecumenical Councils**

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During the last several weeks we have been given gospel lessons that can be understood as the establishment of some of the sacraments of the church. The building of the church continues today with the gospel lesson and commemoration of the Fathers of the 1st Ecumenical Councils. We heard about the sacraments, now it is time to for us to establish the dogma of the church.

Today’s gospel from John is one we might be familiar with because it is part of the same gospel we read on Holy Thursday—the first very long theological gospel we read at the Matins service. One of the key parts of this gospel is the verse: “I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.” Christ is praying in the Garden of Gesthemane to His Father that He has done the work that he was sent here to do. and that now his earthly life is about to end. He is hoping that the Father has recognized his accomplishments and that he wishes to return in the same glory he had before he came into this world. What is rooted in this verse is the theology that Christ and God the Father are of the same essence.

The gospel lesson also has connections to the celebration for this Sunday—Fathers of the 1st Ecumenical Council. In the early centuries different beliefs arose about the divinity of Christ. Today we celebrate the memory of the Fathers who ultimately resolved this issue. The 1st Council at Nicea was convened to define Christ’s relationship to God the Father. At the time the heresy of Arianism was growing fast throughout the empire, so the council put forth the first part of the creed that we say at every Divine Liturgy to correct the erroneous teachings of Arius. Arius taught that Christ was not divine but subordinate to God the Father. This passage in John clearly refutes the doctrine of Arius. When we read the gospel words “mine is thine and thine is mine” there is no disputing that John is proclaiming Christ as having the same essence as God the father. The Nicean Council came to the same conclusion and used the word “*homousios*” or “consubstantial” to establish the relationship between the Father and the Son.

This is the first of seven councils that the Orthodox Church recognizes as “infallible”. In other words, what was established is the true faith that no one can ever dispute. Anyone who disbelieves what was promulgated at these councils has separated themselves from the true faith.

This past Thursday we celebrated the feast of Ascension. For the 40 days we were rejoicing, feasting, greeting each other with Christ is Risen, and now it may seem like we are going back to an ordinary timeframe. Have we really put the paschal joy we experienced in the closet until next year or is that paschal light something that we need to carry with us throughout the year? We need to think about the events that occurred at the Feast of the Ascension to better understand this joy.

At the feast of the Ascension our Lord is gathered with his disciples and his mother. After a time he is lifted up in the clouds and all rejoice at the sight of the Lord ascending to the heights and as it is said: He will sit at the right side of the father. This event is not a day of sadness that the Lord has been taken from us, but it is a day of feasting because of the anticipation of the next event. The disciples are commanded to remain in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit. To the disciples, the anticipation is great because it will be the beginning of their new life. The paschal joy will be the joy of receiving God’s spirit that will give them the fortitude to go forth and to create a church.

There are four significant points about the Ascension that we need to understand. The first is the promise of the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells the disciples, it is good that I go away, because unless I go away the Comforter will not come to you. You see this is why the apostles are joyful, because they will receive that gift that will enable them to go forth and make disciples and build the church. The second important part of the Ascension is that Christ now reigns alongside God the Father. In Peter’s letter he says that everything is now subject to Jesus Christ. St. Paul says in the Letter to the Romans that he is now at the right hand interceding for us when we pray with him. The third is hope. The same Jesus who was taken up to heaven will return in the same way. This is what we are living for. This is what should keep us going because we will someday be with him in the eternal kingdom. The final is mission. We are not to stand around doing mundane activities, but we are to be active members of the body of Christ. Just as it is said in the last verse of Matthew, we need to make disciples of all nations, the last commandment that Christ gives us.

The Ascension is the end of Christ’s ministry on this earth, but more importantly it gives us a foretaste of our own passage on this earth. We will be like Christ in that we will die, resurrect, ascend as it is said in 1st Thessalonians, we will “meet the Lord in the air” and finally we hope to be transformed just like Christ. This is the true meaning of the Ascension we must take with us today.