Thursday, May 21, 2009 – Feast of the Ascension

In some dioceses Ascension is celebrated on Sunday, May 24

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Acts 1:1-11; Psalms 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9; Ephesians 1:17-23; Mark 16:15-20

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. After a good meal and a bottle of wine they bunked down for the night and went to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his friend. “Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see.”

Watson replied, “I see millions upon millions of stars.”

“So what does that tell you?” asked Sherlock.

Watson pondered for a minute. “Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Hierologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you?”

Holmes was silent for a minute and then spoke. “It tells me someone has stolen our tent!”

(Author unknown)

The Feast of the Ascension takes us back to the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry and the beginning of ours.

The first reading today is from the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. The reading ends with this question addressed to the bewildered disciples, “People of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?” Sherlock Holmes and Watson were asking themselves the same thing. The philosophical Watson noticed the stars and pondered their significance. But Holmes asked the obvious question: Where did our tent go?

I work with some pretty poor people here in Cambodia, where annual per capita incomes average $300. Many of these folks look up at the stars each night because they have holes in their roofs, if they are lucky enough to have a roof to sleep under. Thousands of children here live on the streets, having lost parents to war or diseases like AIDS. Their futures have been stolen away from them at an early age.

At Maryknoll’s Little Sprouts Program, where I work, our staff cares for vulnerable children with HIV. Coming home at day’s end after work I read the news and try to understand how so many men and women back in the United States managed to steal the tent while we were all sleeping. The theft of Holmes’ tent was nothing compared to the theft of billions by already wealthy people while the country slept.

Like Watson, I ponder the significance; millions of people around the world, including in the United States, are now suffering because of other’s greed. Like Holmes I look at the practical too: how a stagnant Western economy sends ripples around the world. Understandably, during this economic downturn, U.S. residents have stopped buying stuff. As a result, factories here in Phnom Penh stop making the stuff, and tens of
thousands of young Cambodian women lose their 28 cents an hour jobs and return to their villages wondering about their future, with no unemployment benefits to ease the pain.

Those of us who manage projects in heath care, education and social development worry about the likelihood of decreasing budgets from our donors in Europe and North America. Will we have to decide between food and medicine and school fees – which one(s) to cut? What started as a ripple from Wall Street grows to a tsunami here on Monivong Boulevard (“Main Street” here in Phnom Penh).

Working with some of the world’s poorest folks has taught me that I have something that the investment bankers in Manhattan will never have: I have enough. I don’t ask for much for these children, just a simple roof overhead, 2,100 calories a day and a chance to realize a dream of education. That’s enough.

“People of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?” So let’s wish upon a star that programs like Little Sprouts will not have to fold our tents but can confidently continue to be good news for the poor. Instead of looking in the sky for answers, we confidently go about writing new chapters in the book we call the Acts of the Apostles, started on that day Jesus turned things over to us his disciples.

P.S. With gratitude I write to the many Maryknoll supporters who continue to support our apostolic works when you yourself have lost so much.

Food prices escalated in 2007 and continue to do so focusing attention on global food insecurity and its root cause, poverty. At the same time countries like the U.S. and some developing nations battle obesity. Read this September 2008 Amber Waves article for more information. [Amber Waves: The Economics of Food, Farming, Natural Resources and Rural America is published four times a year by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.]

Now is the time for people to embrace a vision of the world where every person has “enough” of what he or she needs to live. For more information about building secure societies of “enough” visit the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns website.