

Homily based on the readings from May 19, 2026 (Acts 20.17-27; John 17.1-11a)

Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ. Most of us have probably heard this line from Scripture so many times that we barely stop to consider its actual meaning. Our Lord is not just telling us how to behave – that we ought to dedicate our lives to loving and serving him. He is revealing a deeper truth about the universe, about our ultimate destiny as human beings. He is, in fact, describing the true nature of *heaven*.

One of the main criticisms of the Christian worldview, which we often hear from atheists and agnostics, rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of the afterlife. If God is all-loving, the argument goes, how could he reward some of his children with eternal life and condemn the rest to perpetual torment? This would be a reasonable objection, if it were not based on a totally false assumption. The truth,

of course, is that God does not *send* anyone to hell. Everyone who goes there does so by his own free choice – despite, not because of, God’s actions and desires. People go to hell because they reject heaven – because they willfully turn away from the love of God.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is explaining – from a certain perspective – what heaven is actually like. He does not focus on the concrete details, which are undoubtedly beyond the scope of our mortal comprehension. Instead, he tells us exactly what we need to know: *[n]ow this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ.* That is precisely what heaven is – an eternal relationship with God the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ, bound together by the animating love of the Holy Spirit. As the Catechism elaborates:

This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity – this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed – is called “heaven.” (1024)

The point, of course, is that God never *chooses* to send people to hell, but he also cannot *force* anyone to go to heaven. Love, by its very nature, can never be compelled. God gives *every* one of his children *every* conceivable opportunity to reciprocate the love he has for us, but ultimately the choice is ours – and ours alone. If we choose to separate ourselves from his love – as horrific as that decision would be – there is absolutely no way he can stop us.

The Ascension of the Lord – which we celebrated this past Thursday – is a reminder not only of Christ's true nature, but of ours as well. As one of the prayers that day reminded us:

he ascended not to distance himself from our lowly state
but that we, his members, might be confident of following
where he, our Head and Founder, has gone before.

Jesus Christ is not simply a *resident* of heaven – in fact, heaven would not even *exist* without him. He is there right now, as he has been for *eternity*, waiting with open arms for his beloved disciples to join him.