

FIRST READING – C ASCENSION OF THE LORD

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

In the first book, Theophilus,
I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning
until the day when he was taken up to heaven,
after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit
to the apostles whom he had chosen.

Theophilus = thee-AHF-ih-luhs

After his suffering he presented himself alive to them
by many convincing proofs,
appearing to them during forty days
and speaking about the kingdom of God.

While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem,
but to wait there for the promise of the Father.

“This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me;
for John baptized with water,
but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit
not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him,
“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods
that the Father has set by his own authority.

But you will receive power
when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,
in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

When he had said this, as they were watching,
he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven,
suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

They said, “Men of Galilee,
why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”

This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven,
will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Pause for **THREE** seconds

then look up at the people

and say SLOWLY:



The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

SECOND READING – C ASCENSION OF THE LORD

A reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Brothers and sisters,
I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,
may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation
as you come to know him,
so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened,
you may know what is the hope to which he has called you,
what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints,
and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power
for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.
God put this power to work in Christ
when he raised him from the dead
and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,
far above all rule and authority and power and dominion,
and above every name that is named,
not only in this age but also in the age to come.
And he has put all things under his feet
and has made him the head over all things for the Church,
which is his body,
the fullness of him who fills all in all.



PAUSE for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING – C ASCENSION OF THE LORD

The Lord be with you.

And with your spirit.

A reading from the holy gospel according to Luke.

Glory to you, O Lord.

Jesus said to the disciples,
“These are my words that I spoke to you
while I was still with you –
that everything written about me in the law of Moses,
the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”
Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,
and he said to them,
“Thus it is written, that the Christ is to suffer
and to rise from the dead on the third day,
and that repentance and forgiveness of sins
is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations,
beginning from Jerusalem.
You are witnesses of these things.
And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised;
so stay here in the city
until you have been clothed with power from on high.”
Then he led them out as far as Bethany,
and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.
While he was blessing them,
he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.
And they worshipped him,
and returned to Jerusalem with great joy;
and they were continually in the temple blessing God.



The GOSPEL of the LORD.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

SCRIPTURE IN DEPTH

First, let us remind ourselves that Ascension Day should not be thought of as a historical commemoration. The New Testament treats the ascension as an integral part of the Easter event.

In fact, the earlier Easter narratives depict the appearances as manifestations of the already risen and ascended One. Hence Paul could include his Damascus experience among the appearances in 1 Cor 15.

The later appearance narratives (Luke and John) show a tendency to separate the resurrection and the ascension, but still they are not regarded as two successive events. They are separated in order to contemplate the meaning of two aspects of a single, indivisible event.

When this separation occurs, the ascension seems to be variously located: in Lk 24, on Easter Sunday evening or, at the latest, the next day; in John 20, sometime between the appearance to Mary Magdalene (who is told not to touch the risen One because he has not yet ascended) and the appearance to Thomas (who is invited to touch him); in Acts 1, after the forty days (which, however, are symbolic of the time of revelation; there may be no intention to suggest that the ascension actually “occurred” on the fortieth day).

For several centuries the Church did not, either in its writings or in its liturgy, treat the ascension as though it actually “occurred” on the fortieth day.

With the revised Church calendar, we still keep it on the fortieth day as a matter of convenience (and that this is not an absolute rule is indicated by the rubrical permission to transfer the observance to the following Sunday).

This allows us to isolate for contemplation one aspect of the total Easter event.

Reading I: Acts 1:1-11

It is curious that in his two-volume work Luke tells the story of the ascension twice (Lk 24; Acts 1). Each narration brings out a different aspect of the truth.

The version in Acts looks forward to the future, to the inauguration of the Church’s mission and the final return of the ascending One. Luke’s perspective on salvation history represents an adjustment. Salvation history, already in the Old Testament, is constantly readjusted in the light of earlier events.

The earliest Church looked for only a brief interval between the ascension and the parousia, an interval that would be marked by the apostles’ mission to Israel and by persecution and martyrdom. Now salvation history is greatly extended. Paul already had modified it to include the mission to the Gentiles.

Now, for Luke, the Church is here to stay, with a mission to the whole civilized world. But the hope of the parousia is still maintained, and the Church's mission is viewed as a preparation for the end.

Responsorial Psalm: 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9

This is one of the enthronement psalms, which, according to some scholars, were sung at a (hypothetical) annual feast at which the king was enthroned to symbolize YHWH's kingship over his people.

As the king took his seat upon his earthly throne, the whole people would have chanted this psalm in celebration of the kingship of YHWH. The Church in its liturgy has associated this psalm with, and transferred it to, the ascension of Christ.

Ascension Day is the feast of Christ's enthronement, Henceforth God exercises his sovereignty over the universe through his exalted Son.

Reading II: Ephesians 1:17-23

Ephesians, whether written by Paul himself or, as now seems more likely, by a close disciple steeped in the thought of his master, begins, like most of Paul's letters, with an opening thanksgiving and prayer. This prayer reproduces the pattern and phraseology of a liturgical hymn.

The first part of our passage prays for the Church's growth in wisdom and knowledge, and looks to the risen and ascended Christ for the power to foster this growth. The hymn then goes on to elaborate on the exaltation and kingship of Christ.

The New Testament views Christ's kingship as exercised in two concentric circles. The inner circle embraces the Church, where his kingship is known and acknowledged: the outer circle embraces the world, where he is de facto king but his kingship is as yet unrecognized (O. Cullmann). The Church's function is to extend that inner circle to cover more and more of the outer one.

OR

Reading II: Hebrews 9:24-28; 10:19-23

Hebrews 9:24-28 continues the exposition of the high priestly work of Christ in terms of a series of contrasts with the Levitical priesthood. Here are the points made this time, some of them repeated from Hebrews 7:23-28, some of them new:

Levitical Priest	Christ
scene of his work: a material sanctuary	the heavenly sanctuary, God's real presence
repeated offering (yearly)	once for all
offered blood of other creatures	offered his own blood

The last sentence of verse 28 seeks to elucidate the once-for-all character of human death. The reference to the parousia comes rather surprisingly here, but it is probable that all through this passage the author has in mind the ceremony on the Day of Atonement.

After performing his priestly work in the Holy Place, the high priest came out of the temple and showed himself to the people, indicating thereby that the work of the atonement had been accomplished.

The parousia likewise will mark the completion of Christ's high priestly work in heaven: "he always lives to make intercession for them" (Hb 7:25) and "now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (9:24).

Hebrews 10:19-23 stands at the beginning of the last major section of the work. In it the author applies the theological argument of the previous section (Hb 7:1-10, 18) to Christian life. Note the *oun* ("therefore," as in Rom 12:1 and Eph 4:1).

The first part of today's reading can be regarded as a summary of the previous theological argument and as the basis for the ensuing parenthesis.

The Christian life has its focus in the liturgy, in which we "draw near" to the presence of God by traversing the way that the ascending Christ has opened up through his sacrificial death ("through his blood"). We must enter that presence with confidence (because Christ has pioneered the way and also because of our baptism, v. 22b).

When the author speaks of Christ entering through the veil ("Thou within the veil hast entered / Robed in flesh our great High Priest"—the words of this well-known hymn are based on verses 20-21), he is drawing his imagery from the Levitical rite of the Day of Atonement, in which the high priest passed through the veil of the temple into the Holy of Holies.

Perhaps the author had in mind the passion narrative of the Gospels, which elsewhere he shows signs of knowing (for example, in Hb 5:7, with its echoes of the Gethsemane story).

The veil symbolizes the barrier between God and sinful humanity. But then the author curiously muddles the imagery by identifying the veil with the "flesh" of Jesus. Is the author treating the "flesh" as "the appointed means of approach" or as "the obstacle which hindered access" (Westcott)?

The former interpretation would involve taking "flesh" with "way"; the latter, taking "flesh" with "veil." Both interpretations have patristic support, and modern commentators are divided. Whom should we follow?

On the one hand, the flesh of Jesus is always spoken of positively in Hebrews. He took our flesh in order to identify completely with us and to be qualified as our great high priest, and he took that flesh with him, now glorified, as he ascended into heaven.

On the other hand, the veil is something negative, the barrier between humanity and God. Accordingly, against many commentators, we would favor taking “flesh” with “way.” Our access to God is through the glorified humanity of the ascended Christ.

The pattern of Christian worship set forth in this part of today’s reading is succinctly expressed in the *Sursum corda* of the liturgy. As the Orthodox and Reformed traditions have in various ways reminded us, what happens in liturgy is not so much that Christ descends to earth, but that we ascend with him to heaven:

Mighty Lord, in thine ascension
We by faith behold our own.

(Christopher Wordsworth, Hymnal 1940, no. 103)

Gospel: Luke 24:46-53

This reading consists of two halves. The first half is Luke’s version of the appearance to the apostles, which, like the story of the ascension in Acts, looks forward to the mission of the Church, and to the empowering of the Church with the Spirit for that mission. In the second half, the ascension is narrated as in Acts 2.

In the Gospel the ascension narrative looks backward rather than forward. The ascension is here presented, not as the inauguration of the period of the Church—which it also is—but as the conclusion of the earthly ministry of Jesus.

It is a farewell scene, as is indicated by the blessing. Henceforth Christ will be with his followers in a new way. “Jesus is not seen at all times by the believers in this position: even for the disciples it came to an end” (Schlatter).

But unlike most partings, it leaves the disciples rejoicing—precisely because Jesus leaves them with his blessing. Such is the outcome and conclusion of his earthly ministry.

Reginald H. Fuller