

FIRST READING – A 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
(th as in thin)

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 – A 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 – A ASCENSION OF THE LORD

The Lord be with you.

And with your spirit.

A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord

The eleven disciples went to Galilee,
to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.
When they saw him, they worshipped him;
but some doubted.
And Jesus came and said to them,
“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father
and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.
“And remember, I am with you always,
to the end of the age.”



The GOSPEL of the LORD.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

SCRIPTURES 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 Jn 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 [in the Roman Liturgy] to transfer the observance to the following Sunday). This allows us to isolate for contemplation one particular 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 27:1, 4, 7-8*

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 Y(HWH)'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 Y(HWH).

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.

Gospel: Matthew 28:16-20

As we noted in our introduction to this feast, the earlier Easter narratives saw the appearances as manifestations from heaven of the already risen and ascended Christ. This is still the situation in Matthew's story of the final appearance in today's Gospel.

It is the ascended One who says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." It is the ascended One who commissions his apostles and sends them out into the

world in the great missionary charge (see Eph 4:8-13, where the apostolate appears as the gift of the ascended Christ).

The final appearance takes place on a mountain. This, for Matthew, has theological significance.

The great sermon had been preached on a mountain. The Transfiguration took place on a mountain, as in the other Synoptists. And now the great appearance also takes place on a mountain.

This is, in fact, the only appearance that Matthew records, apart from the personal and private one to the women (Mt 28:9-10). All the meaning of the Resurrection appearances is, for Matthew, compressed into this single story.

Such a device was probably suggested to him by the angel's charge to the women in Mk 16:7 to tell the disciples to go to Galilee, where they would see the risen Lord.

The primary significance of the appearances is that they are revelations of the risen One. Because they are revelations, they can be doubted as well as believed. But those who do believe respond in adoration (Mt 28:17).

In his opening words about his authority, the risen One echoes the language about the Son of Man in Dan 7:14 in the wording of the Greek Old Testament, a fact that suggests that this story must have crystallized in the Greek-speaking church.

The declaration of authority is followed by a missionary charge in three parts:

1. The disciples are commanded to "make disciples" of all nations. This is typically Matthean phraseology (cf. Mt 13:52; Mt 27:57). The longer ending in Mark, which has "proclaim the good news" (Mt 16:15), probably represents the earlier tradition, which Matthew has reworded to suit his own interests.

The association of the appearances with the command to mission goes back to the earliest tradition, as the word "apostle" itself shows, as do the terms in which Paul speaks of his own call on the road to Damascus (Gal 1:16).

2. As in Mk 16:16, the call to mission includes the charge to baptize. All our evidence agrees that baptism was practiced by the church right from the outset, and this despite the fact that baptism had not been a feature of the Lord's public ministry.

This remains true even if there was an earlier period when Jesus worked side by side with John the Baptist and during which he too baptized (Jn 3:22).

There can be no doubt that it was the impact of the post-resurrection appearances that led to the revival of baptism by the earliest Christians. Baptism became the way in which

those who had not had a firsthand encounter with the Christ event were brought into its sphere.

The command to baptize given by the risen One in Mark and Matthew (see also the allusions to the forgiveness of sin in the appearance stories of Luke and John) is a verbalization of this experience.

In the earliest community and for some time, baptism was administered in the name of Jesus. It is only in this passage of Matthew and in the *Didache*, a Christian writing probably dating back to the end of the first century, that we hear of the threefold formula.

One may say, however, that the use of Jesus' name alone as a baptismal formula implies the threefold name, for baptism in the name of Jesus implies the confession of him as the Messiah ("Jesus is Lord" was probably the earliest baptismal confession), and in Jewish context Messiah means the agent of God's final salvation, while the bestowal of the Spirit is a consequence of messianic salvation.

Hence, we may say that from the earliest date the Jewish Christians would have understood baptism in an implicitly trinitarian sense. The development of the threefold formula would have become necessary in Gentile communities, where the implications of the primitive confession of Jesus as Lord were no longer understood and had to be spelled out.

This does not mean that we should now go back to the single formula of earliest times. That would have quite a different meaning now—the repudiation of what was implicit in the earliest use of the single formula.

3. The command to baptize is followed by a charge to teach. It is not clear whether this teaching means post-baptismal instruction. "Baptizing" is a present participle in the Greek, as in the English translation, and this could suggest teaching accompanying baptism, that is, catechetical instruction.

After the charge to teach comes a final promise of the permanent presence of the ascended Christ from now until the parousia.

This is a far cry from the perspective of the earliest community, which thought of the interval between the Ascension and the Second Coming as a period of Christ's temporary absence (Acts 3:21).

The wording of this promise thus verbalizes the experience of Christ's presence, an experience made possible for the church through the gift of the Spirit and in the cultus during the intervening period.

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