

Solemnity of the Ascension – Cycle C

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

The revelation we celebrate on this day is that the direct experience of God revealed to men and women in Jesus of Nazareth continues to be experienced when the Body of Christ, the Church, gathers in witness, love and mission. Jesus brought power and hope to people. As He talked, healed, and loved them, they felt the direct presence of God. To be in the company of Jesus was to be in the company of God. Jesus appeared to His disciples after His resurrection. Those appearances were more than their seeing a vision or acknowledging that death could not destroy the Lord. In His appearances Jesus told His disciples that the faithful would continue to experience His presence even though they could no longer see Him. The Holy Spirit would make them aware and sensitive to that presence in the Eucharist. They would feel the same healing power freeing them from their enslavement to sin and guilt. Their vision of life would be enlarged as they grew in their covenant relationship with God.

To say “My life has significance because I am a child of God called to carry out His will in my life” is to make a statement that opens one’s life to new power and possibilities. Experiencing Jesus the Christ, in other words, was not to cease with the death of Jesus or with the last of His resurrection appearances. The experience would continue among the faithful. The power and presence of Christ are eternal experiences, not limited to time and space. The presence of Christ is as much our experience as it was the experience of the disciples. Christ “reigns” eternally with God, the creative power who calls us into being. As we say in the Creed “...He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.”

1st Reading - Acts 1:1-11

Acts has been called “The Gospel of Luke, Volume 2” in that it takes over from where St. Luke stopped when writing his gospel with the ascension forming the hinge point. St. Luke, an educated man, a physician by profession, was meticulous and orderly. He sets out in Acts, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to prove the truth of the Apostles’ teaching and show how rapidly that teaching spread. It recounts the Church’s expansion which, particularly among the Gentiles, was marked by miracles; thus bearing out what our Lord had foretold: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Today’s reading, which documents Jesus’ ascension, records Jesus’ last words to His disciples which include this foretelling of the expansion of His Church.

1:1 In the first book,

The Gospel of Luke

Theophilus,

Who Theophilus is, is unknown although both Luke's gospel and this book are addressed to him.

I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught ² until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions through the holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered,

Greek: *paschein* - usually translated as "passion," is translated here as "suffered." It refers to Jesus' integral passion-death experience.

appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

Forty in Hebrew numerology is a number representing transition/change. Forty years is a generation; the flood was 40 days and 40 nights; Moses was on the mountain for 40 days; the Hebrews wandered in the desert for 40 years; Jesus was tempted for 40 days.

⁴ While meeting with them, he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for "the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak;

Luke 24:49 "I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

⁵ for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the holy Spirit."

This refers back to John's statement in Luke 3:16 (or Matthew 3:11) "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." This precisely demonstrates the prophecy's fulfillment and makes John the Baptist the herald of the Church as well as of the Messiah.

⁶ When they had gathered together they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

This question is of present concern to Luke's community. What is being stressed as the disciple's mistaken hope is not a "worldly, nationalistic" kingdom as much as a hope of an immediate parousia, to which the outpouring of the Spirit was to lead.

⁷ He answered them, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father

has established by his own authority.

It is the preoccupation of an impending parousia that Jesus corrects, not the idea of Israel's restoration (see also Mark 13:32; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3).

⁸ But you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you,

The Spirit is the substitute for the parousia. The Spirit is the principle of continued Christian existence in a new era of sacred history, the era of the Church and mission.

and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jerusalem is the geographic center of sacred history and the influence of the Church will spread in three geographical stages: Jerusalem; Judea and Samaria; the ends of the earth.

⁹ When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.

A visible departure

¹⁰ While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them.

Luke does everything in twos. This brings to mind the finding of the empty tomb in Luke 24:4 and the transfiguration in Luke 9:30; especially the empty tomb where they ask "why do you look for the living among the dead?"

¹¹ They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven."

The ascension is a prefiguration of the parousia.

2nd Reading - Ephesians 1:17-23

Toward the end of his second missionary journey (in the year A.D. 52) Saint Paul stayed for a while in Ephesus (Acts 18:19ff), one of the great cities of Asia Minor, where he preached and founded the church to which this letter is addressed. Shortly after this, a distinguished personality, Apollos, appeared in Ephesus; he received instruction from Aquila and his wife Priscilla, two disciples of Paul (Acts 18:24-26) and he, in turn, prepared the ground for Paul's preaching on his third missionary journey (54-56). Paul's visit was not without incident (Acts 19-20): he was forced to leave the city because of an uproar caused by Demetrius the silversmith. Paul did not forget the Ephesians, however, and, from Rome, he wrote them this letter. Paul's main purpose in writing seems to be to explore the

great mystery of the redemption, of which Christ Himself is the cornerstone, the foundation of the entire spiritual building into whom all Christians should be built. What we hear described in today's reading is Jesus' position in heaven after the ascension.

17 [May] the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,

The phrase "Father of glory" occurs only here in the New Testament, but Acts 7:2 calls Him "God of glory" and 1 Corinthians 2:8 says "Lord of glory."

give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of him.

Not knowledge merely of God's plan, but knowledge "of Him", an experience of God's great love for men in Christ that would be visibly shown in a true brotherhood of men.

"It is this God of the incarnate man who is the Father of glory, wisdom and truth, who gives the Spirit of wisdom and revelation to those who believe in His Son so that they may become wise and contemplate the glory of the Lord with unveiled face (2 Corinthians 3:18). When this wisdom and revelation have made them wise and opened to them the mysteries that were hidden, it follows at once that they have the eyes of their heart enlightened." [Saint Jerome (A.D. 386), *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 1,1,15].

18 May the eyes of (your) hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy one

The members of His Church. Not only the Church on earth (Church Militant) but in purgatory (Church Suffering) and in heaven as well (Church Triumphant).

19 and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe,

God's mighty power overcomes humanly impossible obstacles.

in accord with the exercise of his great might, ²⁰ which he worked in Christ, raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens,

The raising and seating are one continuous action.

21 far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion,

Angelic beings who were thought to control the world and who were created through the wisdom of God.

"He says not merely 'above' but 'far above.' For God is higher than the powers on high. So He led Him up there, the very one who shared our lowly humanity. He led Him from the lowest depth to the highest sovereignty, beyond which there is no higher honor. 'Above every authority,' he says: not merely compared with this or that. ... What gnats are

compared with humans, so is the whole creation compared with God.” [Saint John Chrysostom (between A.D. 392-397), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 3,1,20-23].

and every name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come.

No present or future force or power can block God’s work.

²² And he put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

The Church is the body, Christ is the head.

“Oh, how high He has raised the Church! For, as He were lifting it by some stage machine, He has led it up to a great height and installed it on that throne. For where the head is, there is the body also.” [Saint John Chrysostom (between A.D. 392-397), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 3,1,20-23].

Alternate 2nd Reading - Hebrews 9:24-28, 10:19-23

It is most probable that the Hebrews to whom this epistle is addressed were Christians of Jewish background who were very familiar with both the Greek language and with the culture of the Hebrews, particularly the ceremonies of Mosaic worship. This has caused many commentators to suggest that possibly these “Hebrews” were converts from priestly service.

The main purpose of this epistle is to show the superiority of Christianity over the Old Covenant, the Mosaic worship. To do this, the epistle focuses on Jesus’ priesthood and sacrifice and how they are superior to those of the Levitical priesthood. The reading which we hear today focuses on the Blood of Christ and His once-for-all sacrifice on the altar of the Cross.

9:24 For Christ did not enter into a sanctuary made by hands, a copy of the true one, but heaven itself,

The tabernacle made by Moses and the Temple erected by Solomon were both copies of the Temple in heaven (Exodus 25:9).

that he might now appear before God on our behalf.

Romans 8:34

²⁵ Not that he might offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters each year into the sanctuary with blood that is not his own; ²⁶ if that were so, he would have had to suffer repeatedly from the foundation of the world.

If Jesus' sacrifice had not been definitive and final, but had demanded constant repetition as did the annually repeated sacrifices on the Day of Atonement, he would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. The sacred author here rejects any notion of a repeated sacrifice of Jesus, but not the eternal continuance of His one sacrifice, a continuance we see in Revelation 5:6.

But now once for all he has appeared at the end of the ages

The coming of the Messiah brought about the end of the present age and the inauguration of the "age to come."

to take away sin by his sacrifice.

The sacred author points out that the heavenly sanctuary has always existed, but the heavenly sacrifice, which is now eternally present in the heavenly sanctuary, entered into the eternal order at a determined point in time. It was Jesus' sacrifice on the altar of the cross which opened heaven so that all could approach God and obtain forgiveness for their sins.

27 Just as it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment, 28 so also Christ, offered once to take away the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to take away sin but to bring salvation to those who eagerly await him.

These verses look at three basic truths of Christian belief about the last things:

- 1) the unchanging covenant curse of death;
- 2) the fact that there is a judgment immediately after death; and
- 3) the second coming of Christ in glory.

The second coming of Christ will not be for the purpose of redeeming men from sin but to bring salvation, that is, glory, to those who placed their hope in Him. Christ will come into the world for a second time but not as Redeemer, for His sacrifice on the altar of the cross has already accomplished this once for all; rather, he will come as Judge of all. His coming is "appointed" and is as necessary as death and judgment. The three basic truths of Christian belief are closely interconnected. Immediately after death everyone will be judged on the conduct of his or her life (see 2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:10). We eagerly await His coming because our purpose in living this life is to be with Him in the next one.

10:19 Therefore, brothers, since through the blood of Jesus we have confidence of entrance into the sanctuary 20 by the new and living way

Literally "the recently sacrificed and living way." This is a figurative expression indicating that Christ is the way, and that this way has been recently opened, has been sacrificed and is alive.

he opened for us through the veil, that is, his flesh,

Not only the veil in the Temple, but the barrier erected by God to prevent entry into the

garden (heaven) after the sin of Adam. It was through His flesh, His sacrifice, that the gates of heaven were opened.

21 and since we have “a great priest over the house of God,”

The “house of God” is the Christian community (see Hebrews 3:6).

22 let us approach with a sincere heart and in absolute trust, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water.

The sprinkling of the heart and the washing of the body are references to the purity which is brought about through Christian baptism. The Christian should stay true to the faith he received and professed at baptism, and maintain the purity which it brings.

23 Let us hold unwaveringly to our confession that gives us hope, for he who made the promise is trustworthy.

This “confession” would be the baptismal acknowledgment of Jesus as Son of God.

Gospel - Luke 24:46-53

Like was said in the introduction to our first reading, Luke and Acts form two continuous volumes of the history of the Church. The ascension, which we celebrate on this day, forms the hinge point between the two volumes. In our first reading, we heard the beginning of the Book of Acts where the ascension is recounted and here in our Gospel reading we hear the end of the Gospel of Luke where this same ascension is described.

46 And he [Jesus] said to them [His disciples], “Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day ⁴⁷ and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations,

How is it possible for the Messiah to preach to all nations? He will do it through His Church. Jesus is Messiah in a real and total sense because God’s salvation goes to the ends of the earth through Him.

beginning from Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is the center of Judaism because it contains the Temple; since Jesus fulfills the Law and the prophets, it becomes the geographic center from which Christianity spreads.

48 You are witnesses of these things.

In order for a fact to be attested to in court, two or more witnesses are required. Jesus always has witnesses when he approaches a life and death (including eternal life) situation. Here, this statement is addressed to more than just the eleven. Luke 24:9 says “when they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the eleven and to all the others” and

Luke 24:33 says “there they found the eleven and those with them, assembled together.”

49 And (behold) I am sending the promise of my Father upon you;

The Holy Spirit

but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” 50 Then he led them (out) as far as Bethany,

The Mount of Olives is near Bethany. Acts 1:12 infers that this is where the ascension took place.

raised his hands, and blessed them.

This is the only place in Saint Luke’s gospel where Jesus blesses people. There seems to be a conscious allusion to Sirach 50:20-24. Is there a significance like the blessing Abraham received from the priest-king Melchizadek (Shem)? I think so.

51 As he blessed them he parted from them and was taken up to heaven. 52 They did him homage

This is the first and only time Luke says that the disciples worship Jesus. Compare this with the first reading: this reading ends with worship; Acts shows that they must leave the posture of worship and travel with the Good News.

and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy, 53 and they were continually in the temple praising God.