

Solemnity of the Ascension of Our Lord - A (Ascension Thursday)

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 nor 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 includes 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. The name means "Beloved of God" and could indicate the Christian community as a whole.

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," refers to Jesus' integral passion-death experience.

appearing to them during forty days

Forty in Hebrew numerology is a number representing transition/change. 40 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.

and speaking about the kingdom of God. 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. ¹¹ They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?"

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?".

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 prefigurement of the parousia.

2nd Reading - Ephesians 1:17-23

Toward the end of his second missionary journey (in the year 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,

This title, 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.

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 ones,

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

¹⁹ and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe, in accord with the exercise of his great might,

God's mighty power overcomes humanly impossible obstacles.

²⁰ which he worked in Christ, raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens,

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.

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.

Gospel - Matthew 28:16-20

Commentators have said that this brief ending (this is the closing verses of Matthew's gospel) is so rich that it would be hard to say more or greater things in the same number of words. It has been called an anticipated parousia, a partial fulfillment of Daniel's vision of the Son of Man (Daniel 7 & 8). Its genre combines elements of an Old Testament enthronement pattern with an apostolic commissioning.

¹⁶ The eleven disciples

This number alludes to Judas' defection.

went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them.

No mountain has been previously mentioned in this gospel. The location of the mountain need not be sought; it falls in the same category as the mountain upon which Jesus was tempted (Matthew 4:8), the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5:1), and the mount of transfiguration (Matthew 17:1). A mountain is symbolic of revelation, a kind of Galilean Sinai.

¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted.

Their worship shows their faith, yet this is mingled with doubt – a common psychological experience which gives hope to us moderns. The mention of doubt on the part of some is a candid observation (recall that other gospel accounts refer to “doubting Thomas”). Through all the resurrection stories there runs the idea that those who saw Jesus did not recognize Him. The disciples see an appearance of the risen Jesus, but it is His words rather than His looks which are stressed in this narrative.

¹⁸ Then Jesus approached and said to them, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Note the past tense. It is God who has bestowed divine authority on Jesus as Son of Man. This authority is that of the kingdom of God (see Matthew 6:10; Daniel 7:14; 2 Chronicles 36:23).

¹⁹ Go, therefore,

This great missionary commission concerns the present. The general command is to make disciples and then there are two subordinate clauses which explain how this is to be done: baptize, and teach.

and make disciples of all nations,

This universal call applies to all people of all cultures; even Jewish people who are not yet disciples.

baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit,

This is the first mention of the Trinitarian formula. Baptism admits one to the Church.

²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

The disciples are to carry on Jesus’ teaching ministry, thus laying the foundation for Christian education, theology, and other intellectual work. Teaching follows baptism – once admitted to the Church, the work of the faithful is just beginning.

And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

The task of baptizing and teaching all nations is so daunting that there is a promise of continual support. The gift of the Holy Spirit is not explicitly mentioned here in contrast to John 20:22 and Acts 2:1-4 (see also Matthew 18:20). Jesus is Emmanuel, the divine presence (*shekinah*) with His people as they make decisions, study, pray, preach, baptize and teach.

There is no mention of an ascension in this gospel. It must be assumed that it coincided with the resurrection. On hearing the words of our Gospel today, we should bear in mind that the authority of the Church, which is given it for the salvation of mankind, comes directly from Jesus the Christ, and that this authority, in the sphere of faith and morals, is above any other authority on earth.