

Solemnity Of The Ascension – 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 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.

I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions through the holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 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. 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.

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.

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.

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.