

June 2, 2019

Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord

Luke 24:46-53

A Note: In most dioceses in the United States, the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord is celebrated on the 7th Sunday after Easter. Therefore the focus here is for the gospel text of the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord.

Jesus said to the disciples, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, raised his hands, and blessed them. As he blessed them he parted from them and was taken up to heaven. They did him homage and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple praising God.

Background:

Luke presents two accounts of the Ascension. One is today's gospel text, and the other is the first verses of Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:1-11), which is the first reading for this feast. In Acts, the Ascension story looks forward to the coming of the Holy Spirit, the missionary activity of the early Church to the ends of the earth, and the future establishment of the fullness of the reign of God.

The gospel account focuses on the Ascension as the culmination of Jesus' ministry, and his departure. Jesus gives one last very short instruction to the disciples before he is taken up into heaven. He tells them that the core of his teaching and the events of his death and resurrection have all been predicted in the earlier writings of their tradition. By making only a general reference to the events of Jesus' ministry and their tradition, Luke casts all of Jesus' life and ministry in the light of the religious tradition of the people of Israel.

Another way that Luke expresses that concept is by emphasizing the importance of the holy city, Jerusalem, and the small village of Bethany. Bethany is on the Mount of Olives, and the disciples return to Jerusalem and to the temple to praise God. These two places are associated with Jesus' suffering and death. But now they take on new meaning and are linked to Jesus' ultimate glory. Jerusalem and the temple were the center of Jewish faith. The disciples entered the city not to hide behind locked doors, but to go into the temple praising God. The importance of Jerusalem is a constant theme throughout these verses.

Noticeably absent from the description of the ascension to heaven is any sign of cosmic reaction, angelic presence, or divine recognition of Jesus' final return to take his place with his Father in heaven. The cosmic expression of what has happened is not to be found in heaven, but in God working in and among the disciples as they take the message of Jesus to all the nations. Next Sunday, the feast of Pentecost, the cosmic signs of God's presence will begin to be manifested. For now, the disciples and the church are in a kind of in-between time, between the Resurrection and Jesus' return with the fullness of God's reign. But what is presented here is that the disciples experience the departure of Jesus through a lens of faith. They return from the Ascension filled with a great joy. They are continuously present in the temple praising God. The cosmic impact of what God is doing, which was part of other events of the gospels, is now present inwardly in the lives of the disciples.

Reflection Questions:

1. When I think of the absence of people who once played an important role in my life, I...
2. Some the ways I have been asked to take on new roles in the absence of another are...
3. Some of the ways the disciples might have been tempted to respond to Jesus' absence would include...
4. What strikes you about the response of the disciples to Jesus' Ascension?
5. What do you find comforting in this text? What do you find challenging?
6. Can you take some time now to talk with God honestly about a loss you have experienced in your own life, about how Jesus' ascension seems to have affected the early disciples, or about your own feelings about Jesus' presence or absence in your own life?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for June 2, 2019, the Solemnity of The Ascension of the Lord

In the first book, 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. He presented himself alive to them after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. He enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for "the promise of the Father; for in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." They asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He answered them, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going."

*God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.
All you peoples, clap your hands, shout to God with cries of gladness,
For the Lord, the Most High, the awesome, is the great king over all the earth.
Sing praise to God; sing praise to our king. For the king of all the earth is God;
sing hymns of praise. God reigns over the nations, God sits upon his holy throne.*

Brothers and sisters: May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of him. May your hearts be enlightened, that you may know the hope that belongs to his call, the riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy ones, and the greatness of his power for us who believe, in accord with his great might: which he worked in Christ, raising him from the dead and seating him above every principality, authority, power, and dominion, above every name in this age and in the age to come. He put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

Christ did not enter into a copy of the true sanctuary, but heaven itself, that he might now appear before God on our behalf. Not that he might offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters each year into the sanctuary with blood; if that were so, he would have had to suffer repeatedly from the foundation of the world. But now, once for all, he has appeared to take away sin by his sacrifice. Just as men and women die once, and after this the judgment, 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 await him. Therefore, since through the blood of Jesus we have confidence of entrance into the sanctuary, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach in absolute trust, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water. Let us hold to our confession that gives us hope, for he who made the promise is trustworthy.

Jesus said to his disciples: "Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. Behold I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." He led them out as far as Bethany, and raised his hands, and as he blessed them he parted from them and was taken up to heaven. They did him homage and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple praising God.

Excerpts from Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47:2-9; Ephesians 1:17-23/ Hebrews 9:24-28, 10:19-23; Luke 24:46-53