

Solemnity of the Ascension - B

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 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 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. 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.

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.

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.

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.

Alternate 2nd Reading - Ephesians 4:1-13

Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians divides itself naturally into two parts: The first part extends from 1:3 through the end of chapter 3; and the second part encompasses chapter 4 through 6:9. Part one is called the doctrinal section and addresses the mystery of God's plan to make Christ the head of a new brotherhood of man, a brotherhood which embraces both Jew and Gentile. The second part of Ephesians talks of the Christian life: Unity and growth in the body of Christ, principles for spiritual renewal, and application for the Christian home. Our reading for today talks of unity and growth in the body of Christ, His Church.

^{4:1} I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received,

Saint Paul begins by stating a general principle: a Christian's conduct should be consistent with the calling he has received from God.

² with all humility and gentleness,

In Greek lists, humility was not a virtue. Christ, however, raised self-effacing service to others to the dignity of a virtue by His example.

with patience, bearing with one another through love,

Our actions toward others are to show patience by being slow to retaliate (1 Corinthians 13:4; Galatians 5:22; Colossians 3:12).

³ striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace:

The unity of the Church, the first of its four marks (one, holy, catholic, apostolic), has as its source the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the single inner source of the Christian life and as such is continually moving all members toward what promotes peace and harmony. The letter to the Ephesians is the epistle of Christian unity as we will see in a moment as we hear a seven-fold litany of unity.

⁴ one body

One external visible community

and one Spirit,

The binding force of the unified community

as you were also called to the one hope of your call;

The community shares the hope of being saints and receiving their inheritance, life with Christ.

⁵ one Lord,

Christians pledge obedience to one master. Because of its Jewish roots, the Church has always had a deep appreciation of the oneness of the God who dwells in community with us. Twice each day the Jews prayed the words of Deuteronomy 6:4 "*Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone!*" The Jews believed that the coming of the Messiah would usher in the great revelation of God's oneness to the world. "*The LORD shall become king over the whole earth; on that day the LORD shall be the only one, and his name the only one*" (Zechariah 10:9).

one faith,

The faith which He taught and which the apostles and the Church have expressed in clear statements of doctrine and dogma.

"There can be only one faith; and so, if a person refuses to listen to the Church, he should be considered, so the Lord commands, as a heathen and a publican (see Matthew 18:17)" (Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, 10).

one baptism;

In 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 Saint Paul uses the fact that Christians have been baptized into the one Christ and because of this there cannot be divisions in the community by adherence to human leaders. When we are baptized, we join in the community of believers as equals.

“There is a common dignity of members deriving from their rebirth in Christ, a common grace as sons, a common vocation to perfection, one salvation, one hope and undivided charity. In Christ and in the Church there is, then, no inequality arising from race or nationality, social condition or sex, for ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3:28; see Colossians 3:11)” (Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 32).

6 one God and Father of all,

The Church is bonded together as family, we are all brothers and sisters who share the same Father.

“This is a wonderful vision which allows us to reflect on the unity of mankind: all mankind has a common origin in the Creator, as we are told, ‘one God and father of us all’ (Ephesians 4:6); moreover, all men and women share one and the same nature: all have a material body and an immortal and spiritual soul” (Pope Pius XII, *Summi Pontificatus*, 18).

who is over all and through all and in all.

God’s lordship and control over things means that He is the author and maintainer of their unity.

7 But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

The diversity of the gifts (graces, charisms) which accompany the various vocations given to the members of the Church does not undermine its unity; rather, they enhance it, because it is Christ Himself who bestows these gifts.

⁸ Therefore, it says: "He ascended on high and took prisoners captive; he gave gifts to men."

Psalm 68:18 (Psalm 68:19 in the New American Bible) is quoted. The original context of the Psalm is that of God leading His people in a triumphant march through the desert into Canaan, where He effects a great victory with many captives and much spoil. Rabbinic exegesis interpreted this verse with reference to Moses, who ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Law from God and give it as a gift to mankind. With this rabbinic meaning in mind, the Psalm was read in the synagogue for Pentecost, the feast which commemorated the giving of the Law. Saint Paul gives us a Christian exegesis of the text in that Christ ascended in victory into the heavens in order to give men on earth the gift of the Spirit to be exercised in the various ministries of the Church.

⁹ What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended into the lower (regions) of the earth?

Common exegesis of this passage interprets the "lower regions of the earth" to be the abode of the dead (sheol, hades), as we recite in the Apostles' Creed "... He descended into hell ..." This interpretation is supported by 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6. Other exegetes maintain that this refers to Jesus' incarnation and earthly life, in view of His heavenly life. The first interpretation seems the more probable to me. Being fully human, the soul of Jesus, at the moment of His death on the cross, would have descended to the abode of the dead.

¹⁰ The one who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.

According to a Jewish tradition (2 Enoch 8) there were seven heavens. What the sacred writer is saying here is that the exalted Christ is beyond the limitations of the different heavens and that His power and active presence extends to all the universe.

¹¹ And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers,

Saint Paul is here referring to ministries of teaching and government in the Church, which are performed not only in a charismatic way, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, but as a ministry which is entrusted to an

individual by the glorified Lord. The “apostles” may refer to the twelve, or to a wider group (1 Corinthians 15:7; Romans 16:7) which includes others sent as missionaries to establish new Christian communities. Alongside the apostles come “prophets” who are also the bedrock of the Church, the trustees of revelation. A prophet is not someone who is “sent” but one whose role is to “up build, encourage and console” (see 1 Corinthians 14:3; Acts 13:1); to monitor the status of the covenant. The “evangelists” were ones who had not received a direct revelation but devoted themselves to preaching the Gospel which the apostles had passed on to them (Acts 21:8; 2 Timothy 4:5). The “pastors and teachers” have the role of governing and giving ongoing instruction to a particular community.

12 to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

The various gifts are given by the Spirit to men to equip all the faithful for work in Christ’s service. All the gifts are given for the benefit of the entire community. Any gift which you possess and don’t use deprives not only you of its benefit, but the entire community as well.

13 until we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God,

The term “Son of God” is seldom used in the epistles (Romans 1:4; Galatians 2:20) and when it is used, it refers to Jesus in His humanity. Here, “knowledge of the Son of God” means capturing the vision of the perfect man; the man who reaches maturity in Christ by living the human life perfectly. It is developing a conscientious approach to the personal obligations which faith presupposes is the mark of maturity.

to mature manhood, to the extent of the full stature of Christ.

The “full stature of Christ” means the Church itself and all Christians who are incorporated into the body of Christ. When a boat is “full,” it has not only full cargo holds, but a complete compliment of crew and outfitting as well.

“As members of the living Christ, incorporated into Him and made like Him by Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, all the faithful have an obligation to collaborate in the spreading and growth of His body, so that they might bring it to fullness as soon as possible” (Vatican II, *Ad gentes*, 36).

Gospel - Mark 16:15-20

Our gospel reading for today is the final six verses of the Gospel of Mark. This reading is itself part of a longer ending to Mark's Gospel which does not appear in the best and earliest manuscripts which are now available. It is currently thought by some scholars that this longer ending (verses 9 through 20), is a second century compilation of appearance stories based on Luke 24.

15 He said to them, "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature.

This is the mission of the entire Church in union with the bishops and pope. The bishops and pope are the successors to the original apostles to whom this commission was given.

16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Faith and baptism are prerequisites to salvation, but not the only ones. If we are to be "saved," if we are to have eternal life, we must have a total and absolute commitment to Jesus and give Him total submission of our will and total obedience to His teachings. This means that in order to be saved we must (and this is by no means an exhaustive list):

- Believe (John 3:15-16; Acts 16:31)
- Be baptized (1 Peter 3:21)
- Believe and be baptized (our reading today)
- Believe and obey (John 3:36)
- Keep His word (John 8:51)
- Keep the commandments (Matthew 19:17)
- Confess and believe (Romans 10:9)
- Be martyred for the faith (Mark 8:25, 13:13; Luke 9:24)
- Hear and believe (John 5:24)
- Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned (Matthew 25:46)
- Accept God's gift of grace (Ephesians 2:8)

- Call on the name of Jesus (Acts 2:21; Romans 10:13)
- Hope (Romans 8:24)
- Leave old life for His name's sake (Matthew 19:29; Mark 10:21-30; Luke 18:26-30; John 12:25)
- Endure to the end (Matthew 10:22; 24:13)
- Undergo purgation (1 Corinthians 3:15)
- Love God with all your heart, soul, strength & mind, and neighbor as self (Luke 10:25-28)
- Eat His body and drink His blood (John 6:51, 53-58)

In short, and in the last recorded words of the Blessed Virgin, one must "Do whatever He tells you" (John 2:5). We don't get to pick and choose from the list like a Chinese menu, taking what we like and leaving what we don't, we must endeavor throughout our lives to do everything which He commands.

17 These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. 18 They will pick up serpents (with their hands), and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them.

Taken literally, this would mean that we are to put the Lord to the test, something which is forbidden in Deuteronomy 6:16 and 1 Corinthians 10:9. Throughout the Scriptures, Satan is depicted as a serpent or dragon. What this passage means is that the well-grounded Christian can encounter Satan inspired works (heretical writings/sects) and not be affected by them but instead are able to rebuke them.

"For what else are hearing, reading and copiously depositing things in the memory, than several stages of drinking in thoughts? The Lord, however, foretold concerning His faithful followers, that even 'if they should drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them.' And thus it happens that they who read with judgment, and bestow their approval on whatever is commendable according to the rule of faith, and disapprove of things which ought to be repudiated, even if they commit to their memory heretical statements which are declared to be worthy of disapproval, they receive no harm from the poisonous and depraved nature of these sentences (Saint Augustine, *On the Soul and Its Origin*, 2;23).

They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover."

These manifestations were common in the early Church (Acts 1-11; 28:3-6).

19 So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God.

The place of highest honor. This is the sixth article of the Nicene Creed.

20 But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.

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