

Ascension of the Lord Year A Readings and Commentary

Summary by Glenn CJ Byer, MA SLD: The most recent revision of the Lectionary altered the order of readings for the Ascension of the Lord, changing the Gospels from a one-year to a three-year cycle. The first reading, psalm and the first option for the second reading are constant across the years. Additional options for the second reading are given in year B (two additional options from Ephesians) and C (and additional option from Hebrews).

The Gospel accounts all deal with the Ascension of Jesus into heaven and the mission of the apostles to bring Christ to the whole world. The account in Luke includes the period of waiting that the apostles are to do before the descent of the Holy Spirit. The first reading today from the Acts of the Apostles describes this same event.

The Psalm today matches the Gospel and first reading well, as it is a 'psalm of ascent' one of the royal psalms which celebrate the king taking his throne. Christ in his ascent is seen as taking his place in the heavenly hierarchy. All of these readings, then place the ascension as a foundational event in the history of salvation, for Christ, having destroyed the gates of death now leads all who follow him to the heavenly realm. That is the point of the second reading: all who hear the call of Christ and respond with love will share in the inheritance that is his from the Father.

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First Reading Acts 1:1-11

As the Apostles were looking on, Jesus was lifted up.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles

In the first book, Theophilus,
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,
appearing to them during forty days
and speaking about the kingdom of God.

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

When they had gathered together 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 by his own authority.
But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,
and 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 from you into heaven
will return in the same way as you have seen him going into
heaven."

The word of the Lord

Acts 1:1-11

Commentary by Tom Conry: As with the gospel of Luke, the author of Acts begins with a kind of prose-poem that serves notice to the audience that this is literature. It is the story of the continuation of all that Jesus "began to do and teach." The operative word here is "began." The story of Jesus that began in little Galilee and culminated in fabled (for the foreign readers) Jerusalem is now on its way out into the world, which is to say, Rome.

The dialogue in 1:6-8 ("is this the time when you will restore the kingdom?") is Luke's reason for the existence of the communities of believers. Luke has neatly divided history into the time before Jesus, the time of Jesus, and the time between Jesus and the final restoration of the reign of heaven. The communities described in Acts (and us too) are all lodged in this third period, and Acts of the Apostles is the story of how our time began. This is neatly encapsulated in the response of

the two men in white robes (1:11), white robes usually signifying judgment and the end-times.

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Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9

R(6) God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord. **Or:** **R**Alleluia.

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.

God mounts his throne amid shouts of joy;
the LORD, amid trumpet blasts.
Sing praise to God, sing praise;
sing praise to our king, sing praise.

For king of all the earth is God;
sing hymns of praise.
God reigns over the nations,
God sits upon his holy throne.

Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9

Commentary by John Paul Heil: Main Theme: God is ENTHRONED in heaven as KING over all the earth.

This hymn invites all the peoples of the earth to acknowledge and celebrate with great gladness and joy the universal rule of the God of Israel who is enthroned in heaven as king over all nations. Christian liturgical tradition applies the psalm's assertion that "God mounts his throne amid shouts of joy; the Lord, amid trumpet blasts" to Jesus' glorious ascension into heaven after appearing to the apostles as the risen Lord for a period of forty days (today's first reading). The psalm thus underscores the ascension of Jesus as his heavenly enthronement with divine power and authority over all peoples of the earth. The psalm helps us then to realize that the "ascension" of Jesus

complements his "resurrection" from the dead. Whereas the "resurrection" focuses on Jesus' triumphant victory over the universal power of death--since all human beings die, the "ascension" of Jesus into heaven focuses on the consequences of that victory for all peoples. Jesus was not merely "raised" from the dead to die again (like Lazarus and others who were "raised" from the dead by Jesus), nor was his "resurrection" merely a personal, individual victory over death for him alone. Rather, Jesus was "raised" and "ascended," that is, royally enthroned in exaltation in heaven with universal power over death for all peoples of the world.

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Second Reading: Ephesians 1:17-23

God seated Jesus at his right hand in the heavens.

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians

Brothers and sisters:

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,
give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation
resulting in knowledge of him.

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,
and what is the surpassing greatness of his power
for us who believe,
in accord with the exercise of his great might,
which he worked in Christ,
raising him from the dead
and seating him at his right hand in the heavens,
far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion,
and every name that is named
not only in this age but also in the one to come.

And 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.

The word of the Lord

Ephesians 1:17-23

Commentary by Deacon Owen Cummings: The Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, David F. Ford, describes the chapter in the letter to the Ephesians from which our reading has come like this: "Ephesians chapter 1 is perhaps the most daring statement of human identity and worth conceivable..." The most daring statement of human identity and worth conceivable? If the passage is read with care we will see the cogency of this claim. For St. Paul, the person is identified as the one who may come "to know God clearly." Knowledge in biblical use demands relationship, and is not simply conceptual clarity. Our clear knowledge of God is not knowing *about* God, but being drawn into communion with God. This becomes the basis for "the great hope to which he has called (us)," the hope that the pattern of Christ's passing from death to glorified life will be our pattern too. We are destined for eternal, glorified, resurrected life in God. If God is Head of his Body, the Church, as Paul says, then quite simply and amazingly, we share in the dominion and glory of that Head. In a word, this glorious destiny in which we live and to the fullness of which we are being drawn, is our divinization in Christ. The Ascension celebrates the final advent of the human body of Christ -- risen, renewed and transformed -- in heaven, in God's "place," at the Father's right hand. But it is celebrated liturgically by the Church not only to tell us something about Jesus Christ, but also about ourselves. Christology, is anthropology in a mode of fulfillment. By grace, we are to be christified, brought in Christ before the Father, forever. David Ford's comment could not be more accurate. This is truly the most daring statement of human identity and worth conceivable.

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Gospel Acclamation Matthew 28:19a, 20b

✠ Alleluia, alleluia.

Go and teach all nations, says the Lord;
I am with you always, until the end of the world.

Gospel Matthew 28:16-20

All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

A reading from the conclusion of the holy Gospel according to Matthew

The eleven disciples went to Galilee,
to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them.
When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted.
Then Jesus approached and said to them,
"All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father,
and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.
And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

The Gospel of the Lord

Matthew 28:16-20

Commentary by Fr. Damien Dougherty, O.F.M.: The tenor of this final command of Jesus to the disciples is markedly ecclesial in harmony with that character proper to the "ecclesiastical gospel" of Matthew. Their "mission" that is to know no limits in space or time has as its specific aim "making disciples," bringing all people to adherence of faith to the person as well as the teaching of the Christ.

They are also to administer Baptism to them in the name of the Trinity as a seal upon their personal adhesion to Jesus and as an external sign of their belonging to his family. The accomplishment of these directives, however, is inseparable from the observance, in theory and practice, of the evangelical precepts.

The final assurance of Jesus regarding his unceasing assistance of his disciples, his enduring presence within his Church, is a resumption of the theme of "Emmanuel" ("with-us-is-God"), recalled by the Evangelist at the very beginning of this "Christian history of salvation" (cf. 1,23). This theme engages again and applies to this new Christian reality that which can be called the fundamental dogma of Judaism, i.e., the divine *Shekinah*, the presence of Yahweh in the midst of his people (cf. Deut. 4, 7).

The consummate message is that Jesus, with this solemn affirmation, presents himself in precisely the same manner: the vivifying principle and propelling center of the community of the redeemed. It is with this heartening assurance, while omitting any hint of the ascension and the descent of the Spirit, that Matthew concludes his gospel.

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