

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Ascension of the Lord

Year C

29 May 2022



Collect

Gladden us with holy joys, almighty God,
and make us rejoice with devout thanksgiving,
for the Ascension of Christ your Son
is our exaltation,
and, where the Head has gone before in glory,
the Body is called to follow in hope.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

Whenever we recite the Nicene Creed, we declare that the Son of God “came down from heaven,” suffered, died, rose again and “ascended into heaven.” This spatial depiction of heaven as above and earth beneath is pervasive in the scriptures and firmly embedded in our imaginations. Luke’s twin accounts of Jesus’ ascension reinforce the notion that Jesus has departed this world to dwell in a distant celestial realm. It’s no easier to re-imagine this event than it is for us to let go of the idea that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west.

But the scriptures themselves confirm that the risen One hasn’t left the world but becomes more present to it than ever before. The very last words of Matthew’s gospel are those of Jesus: “I am with you always; yes, to the end of time” (28:20). In his farewell discourse in the gospel of John, Jesus speaks often of his departure from this world while pledging to dwell with and within his disciples.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul holds these two perspectives together: “He who descended is the same one who has ascended far above the heavens, so that he might fill all things” (4:10). Freed from the constraints of time and space, Jesus Christ fills all things with his presence. “Everything in heaven and everything on earth” has been “reconciled through him and for him” (Col 1:20). That’s what the Ascension celebrates: Christ filling the whole of creation with his glorious presence.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11

In my earlier work, *Theophilus*, I dealt with everything Jesus had done and taught from the beginning until the day he gave his instructions to the apostles he had chosen through the Holy Spirit, and was taken up to heaven. He had shown himself alive to them after his Passion by many demonstrations: for forty days he had continued to appear to them and tell them about the kingdom of God. When he had been at table with them, he had told them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for what the Father had promised. 'It is' he had said 'what you have heard me speak about: John baptised with water but you, not many days from now, will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.'

Now having met together, they asked him, 'Lord, has the time come? Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know times or dates that the Father has decided by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth.'

As he said this he was lifted up while they looked on, and a cloud took him from their sight. They were still staring into the sky when suddenly two men in white were standing near them and they said, 'Why are you men from Galilee standing here looking into the sky? Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, this same Jesus will come back in the same way as you have seen him go there.'

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 46:2-3, 6-9

R. God mounts his throne to shouts of joy:
a blare of trumpets for the Lord.
or

R. Alleluia.

All peoples, clap your hands,
cry to God with shouts of joy!
For the Lord, the Most High, we must fear,
great king over all the earth. R.

God goes up with shouts of joy;
the Lord goes up with trumpet blast.
Sing praise for God, sing praise,
sing praise to our king, sing praise. R.

God is king of all the earth.
Sing praise with all your skill.
God is king over the nations;
God reigns on his holy throne. R.

First Reading

There is an interesting difference of detail between Luke's gospel and the Acts with regard to the ascension. In the gospel the ascension appears to take place at the end of Easter Day (24:50-53); in the Acts it occurs forty days later. In his gospel Luke (like John) presents the easter mystery as a unified event, comprising resurrection, ascension and sending of the Spirit. In Acts it suits his purpose to highlight each phase separately, allowing time for the disciples' experience to mature. The number forty, of course, has a fine biblical pedigree.

Today's reading begins with a dedication to Theophilus that parallels the one in the gospel (1:3) and continues to reinforce the author's claim to literary respectability. Luke then proceeds to populate the forty days with Jesus' appearances and instructions. In spite of the apostles still expecting him "to restore the kingdom to Israel," Jesus gives them a mandate to be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth." This one verse encapsulates Luke's agenda for the whole book. Geographically it culminates in Rome, but temporally it extends until Jesus returns "in the same way you have seen him go."

The reading falls into three parts. The first is Luke's formal introduction and resumé of the post-resurrection interlude. The second is Jesus' final interaction with the apostles, and the third is Luke's account of the ascension. The variety of material – reporting, instruction, dialogue and action – make this an interesting text for readers to proclaim and for the assembly to engage with.

Responsorial Psalm

The feast of the Ascension is the only occasion when Psalm 46/47 is used for a Sunday or feast day. It celebrates God's sovereignty not just over Israel but all peoples of the earth. It may or may not have accompanied a liturgical rite, but all the elements of such a ceremony are present. The clapping, shouting, trumpet-sounding and singing suggest a festive procession.

In the Christian tradition references to the Lord going up and reigning on a holy throne have been interpreted as referring to Jesus' ascension, hence its use today. The phrase "God goes up" in the second stanza has been rendered "God mounts his throne" in the response.

Many psalms call on those present to sing praise to God, but this one makes a special claim for musical rendition. Failing that, the onus is on readers to proclaim it with exuberance. They will need to take special care when they announce the unfamiliar, two-part response. It calls for an upward inflection on "shouts of joy" followed by a moment's pause before the remainder is proceeded with. Readers may need to repeat it with the assembly after the first verse.

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews **9:24–28; 10:19–23**

It is not as though Christ has entered a man-made sanctuary which was only modelled on the real one; but it was heaven itself, so that he could appear in the actual presence of God on our behalf. And he does not have to offer himself again and again, like the high priest going into the sanctuary year after year with the blood that is not his own, or else he would have had to suffer over and over again since the world began. Instead of that, he has made his appearance once and for all, now at the end of the last age, to do away with sin by sacrificing himself. Since men only die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, too, offers himself only once to take the faults of many on himself, and when he appears a second time, it will not be to deal with sin but to reward with salvation those who are waiting for him.

In other words, brothers, through the blood of Jesus we have the right to enter the sanctuary, by a new way which he had opened for us, a living opening through the curtain, that is to say, his body. And we have the supreme high priest over all the house of God. So as we go in, let us be sincere in heart and filled with faith, our mind sprinkled and free from any trace of bad conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us keep firm in the hope we profess, because the one who made the promise is faithful.

A reading from the holy Gospel **according to Luke** **24:46–53**

Jesus said to his disciples: ‘You see how it is written that the Christ would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that, in his name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to this.

‘And now I am sending down to you what the Father has promised. Stay in the city then, until you are clothed with the power from on high.’ Then he took them out as far as the outskirts of Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. Now as he blessed them, he withdrew from them and was carried up heaven. They worshipped him and then went back to Jerusalem full of joy; and they were continually in the Temple praising God.

Second Reading

Given the choice between a beautiful prayer from the letter to the Ephesians or a theological thesis from the letter to the Hebrews, it’s understandable that the former might be the default text for today. Nonetheless this commentary will grapple with the latter.

The unknown author of Hebrews is writing to encourage Christians in danger of falling away from their faith. He wants to persuade them of the superiority of Christ’s priestly self-sacrifice over Jewish sacrificial and atonement rites. Assuming their knowledge of Jewish worship practices, he argues that these have been entirely superseded by the eternally efficacious sacrifice of Christ. When he offered himself on the cross, Christ did away with sin once and for all and laid open the heavenly sanctuary. Unlike the Jewish faithful denied entry to the Holy of Holies, Christian believers have free access through Christ to the house of God. While awaiting his return, the baptised are to live with faith, hope and sincerity.

Clearly this text, a combination of extracts from chapters 9 and 10, has been chosen for its reference to Jesus’ entry into heaven. Those not versed in the tradition of Jewish worship will find this reading a challenge to comprehend. The close argumentation and high literary style add to the difficulty. This puts the onus on readers to prepare well. In the first place, they will need to study the text well and assure themselves they have a clear grasp of the key points the author is making as well as his line of argument. And secondly, they will need to practise delivering the lengthy and heavily laden sentences with confidence and clarity.

Gospel

Of all four gospels, Luke’s has the sunniest ending. The whole conclusion is upbeat. Jesus gives his disciples a short summation of the good news, commissions them, promises them “power from on high,” blesses them, withdraws from their earthly company, and leaves them “full of joy.” As has been the case throughout this gospel, Jerusalem remains central to the story. It’s where the mystery of salvation has been played out and the base from which the good news will be “preached to all the nations.” That’s a tale for another book. In the meantime the disciples remain “continually in the Temple praising God,” bringing the story to a close in the same place it began, when Simeon praised God for the light that would “enlighten the pagans” (2:32).

As noted above, Luke’s gospel places the ascension at the close of Easter Day, after the resurrection, the Emmaus story, and Jesus’ evening appearance in Jerusalem. This unified account of the paschal event is akin to the seamless movement described by John in his gospel, but with one notable difference. John has Jesus impart the Holy Spirit to his disciples that Easter evening. Luke signals an interlude during which they must wait for this gift. Those who proclaim this reading will surely do so gladly.

Blessing for Ascension

May almighty God bless us,
for on this very day his Only Begotten Son
pierced the heights of heaven
and unlocked for us the way
to ascend to where he is.

Amen.

May he grant that,
as Christ after his Resurrection
was seen plainly by his disciples,
so when he comes as Judge
he may show himself merciful to us for all eternity.

Amen.

And may we, who believe he is seated
with the Father in his majesty,
know with joy the fulfilment of his promise
to stay with you until the end of time.

Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.

Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for The Ascension of the Lord, Roman Missal p 713.)