

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Ascension of the Lord

Year A

21 May 2023



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,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

In his parting words in Matthew's gospel, Jesus declares, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me". The author of the letter to the Ephesians is more expansive. Christ is "above every Sovereignty, Authority, Power, or Domination . . . not only in this age but in the age to come". These absolute claims once disarmed the powers of pagan gods and the Roman emperor. Ever since they have put the imperious demands of all worldly authorities on notice.

Nonetheless they pose a serious challenge for Christian believers. In a world of brute force, despotic rulers, economic exploitation, technological disruption and ecological vandalism, what are we to make of the authority of Christ? In an era where the moral authority of the Church has been severely shaken by major cultural shifts and especially the sexual abuse crisis, how can Christ be claimed as the ultimate authority?

At the global level, Christians face a test of collective faith. They are being reminded more than ever that Jesus' path to universal lordship was by way of the cross. It was by being dispossessed of everything, even of his life, that Jesus was freed to reign. At the local level, believers would be wise to take note of every occasion where love, truth, beauty and goodness prevail. These are precious moments of grace that feed our faith.

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.'

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

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.**

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 of St Paul
to the Ephesians**

1:17–23

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a spirit of wisdom and perception of what is revealed, to bring you to full knowledge of him. May he enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see what hope his call holds for you, what rich glories he has promised the saints will inherit and how infinitely great is the power that he has exercised for us believers. This you can tell from the strength of his power at work in Christ, when he used it to raise him from the dead and to make him sit at his right hand, in heaven, far above every Sovereignty, Authority, Power, or Domination, or any other name that can be named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come. He has put all things under his feet, and made him as the ruler of everything, the head of the Church; which is his body, the fullness of him who fills the whole creation.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Matthew**

28:16–20

The eleven disciples set out for Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had arranged to meet them. When they saw him they fell down before him, though some hesitated. Jesus came up and spoke to them. He said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.'

Second Reading

After Paul's opening greeting, the letter to the Ephesians blossoms into an elaborate Jewish-style prayer of blessing. That's the background for today's reading which is the passage that follows. In a bridging verse that's been omitted, Paul tells the community that he prays and thanks God for them. He then launches into a beautiful prayer that asks God to bestow wisdom and insight on the Ephesians. He wants them to be able to appreciate how wonderful, powerful and promising God's work is on their behalf.

This prompts him to move into teaching mode. The second half of the reading spells out the all-surpassing authority of Christ. Having been raised from the dead, he now reigns supreme over every imaginable power, present and future, at work in the universe. He is the be-all and end-all of the entire creation, and as such, head of the Church which is his body. While the ascension is not explicitly named, it is implied in the reference to God who, having raised Christ from the dead, makes him "sit at his right hand".

This is an inspiring text for readers to pray and proclaim, but the lengthy sentences present a challenge (more so in the NRSV, though the lines are set out helpfully). Careful preparation and practice is called for. Readers need to distinguish between the trunk, the limbs and the branchlets. Varied emphasis and tone, allied with well-chosen pauses, will allow the assembly to be heartened by this spiritual vision.

Gospel

Most of the gospel texts for the Sundays of Easter come from John's gospel, but today we return to Matthew, the gospel for Year A. We hear the final five verses. Jesus appears to the eleven (not named as apostles, but as disciples) and charges them with a global mission to preach and baptise. Neither here nor earlier in the gospel is there any reference to Jesus' ascension. In fact the gospel concludes with his promise to be with the disciples always, "yes, to the end of time".

This final post-resurrection appearance of Jesus takes place in Galilee where the apostles were first called. It also occurs on a mountain, a common biblical setting for encounters with the divine. Even at this solemn commissioning, Matthew is unafraid to record that when the disciples saw Jesus, "some hesitated". Another curiosity is that Matthew alone, among all the New Testament writers, provides the trinitarian formula for baptism that ultimately became the sacramental norm. Elsewhere, baptism was usually "in the name of the Lord Jesus".

The brief mention of the disciples' hesitation only serves to highlight the sure authority that pervades this text. As the resounding conclusion to Matthew's gospel, it calls for a strong and assertive delivery.

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.)