

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Ascension of the Lord

Year B

16 May 2021



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

Only one verse in the entire New Testament makes chronological reference to the ascension. In Acts 1:3, Luke states that Jesus continued to appear to the disciples for forty days after his resurrection. He goes on to present his account of Jesus being taken up into heaven.

In spite of this ancient witness, the first testimony to the celebration of “Ascension Thursday” in Rome does not appear until around the year 500. Originally the fifty days of the Easter season were celebrated as a single unit culminating in the feast of Pentecost. Gradually, however, this unity broke down until the season was divided between the forty days leading to Ascension, and the ten days from there to Pentecost. Pentecost itself became a separate feast with an octave.

Since Vatican II we have largely recovered the initial unity of the Easter season. But not quite, because the document governing the liturgical year still refers to the weekdays between Ascension and Pentecost as a preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit. In Australia Luke’s chronology is not taken literally; the Ascension of the Lord is transferred to the following Sunday.

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

Luke uses the ascension as the hinge between his two works. His gospel concludes with a brief reference to the ascension, and Acts opens with a longer account. This is what we hear first every year.

The reading begins in a rhetorical style that echoes that of the prologue to Luke's gospel. He follows the literary custom of the time by beginning his work with a dedication, to his presumed patron Theophilus.

The passage as a whole serves as a recapitulation of the last chapter of the gospel, covering the period between Jesus' resurrection and ascension. But the description of the ascension is more extended.

The reader will need to do justice to the formality of the first part of the reading. It calls for a degree of gravity; the writer is establishing his credentials. The passage then becomes a narrative of events that are described with sufficient detail for listeners to be able to enter imaginatively into the action. As moderns, they may find themselves mentally dissenting from the ancient cosmology that has Jesus ascending into the sky, but this is not the reader's concern.

Further on there is dialogue and direct speech. These different elements provide readers with the opportunity to exercise their skills and deliver an engaging proclamation of the text.

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

Psalm 46/47 is one of a group of psalms called "enthronement psalms" because they appear to be connected with festivals celebrating divine kingship. Clearly this psalm is inspired by an especially festive celebration. There is reference to singing, clapping, blaring trumpets, royal progress, and perhaps some ritual of enthronement. It is full of exuberance.

Readers and congregation alike may find it difficult to enter spontaneously into this excess of enthusiasm, but the text deserves to be proclaimed in an energetic spirit of praise. The response is taken from within the psalm itself.

How God's claim of sovereignty over his people related to the role of earthly kings in Israel is addressed elsewhere in the Old Testament.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Ephesians

4:1–13

I, the prisoner in the Lord, implore you to lead a life worthy of your vocation. Bear with one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness and patience. Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together. There is one Body, one Spirit, just as you were all called into one and the same hope when you were called. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, over all, through all and within all.

Each one of us, however, has been given his own share of grace, given as Christ allotted it. [It was said that he would:

When he ascended to the height, he captured prisoners, he gave gifts to men.

When it says, 'he ascended', what can it mean if not that he descended right down to the lower regions of the earth?] The one who rose higher than all the heavens to fill all things is none other than the one who descended. And to some, his gift was that they should be apostles; to some, prophets; to some, evangelists; to some, pastors and teachers; so that the saints together make a unity in the work of service, building up the body of Christ. In this way we are all to come to unity in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God, until we become the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself.

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

16:15–20

Jesus showed himself to the Eleven, and said to them, 'Go out to the whole world, proclaim the Good News to all creation. He who believes and is baptised will be saved; he who does not believe will be condemned. These are the signs that will be associated with believers: in my name they will cast out devils; they will have the gift of tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and be unharmed should they drink deadly poison; they will lay their hands on the sick, who will recover.'

And so the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven: there at the right hand of God he took his place, while they, going out, preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word by the signs that accompanied it.

Second Reading

The second reading for Ascension may change from year to year. Today's option, from the letter to the Ephesians, comes in a longer and a shorter form. The latter omits the middle section of the reading where a psalm verse is quoted and interpreted. While this passage is rather difficult to follow, it is the very place where explicit reference is made to the ascension.

If the shorter version is to be read, readers need to note that there appears to be a mistake in the lectionary. Confusingly, the shorter version still retains the last sentence of the interpretation (i.e. "The one who rose higher . . . the one who descended"). It would be best to omit this.

The passage as a whole is taken from the second half of Ephesians where Paul offers lengthy instruction about how Christians should behave. The principal theme is that of unity-in-diversity. There are many gifts, but only "one Body, one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism".

The psalm verse is quoted to present Christ, having ascended to heaven, as the giver of the gifts with which the community is blessed. This in turn prompts reference to his descent, an event which has made its way into the Apostles Creed as "he descended into hell".

The teaching that Paul offers is serious yet positive. It needs to be proclaimed with suitable deliberation and in an affirmative tone. Readers will need to take special care to practise the middle section (verses 8-10). It may seem a rather obscure detour but it is meant to shed light on the feast being celebrated. This is the reader's task – to communicate its message to the congregation as clearly as possible. Remember that they only hear it once!

Gospel

The gospel reading consists of the concluding verses of what is called the "longer ending" of Mark's gospel. Both the "shorter ending" (16:8b) and the "longer ending" (16:9-20) appear to be later additions to the gospel, which would otherwise have ended with the women fleeing from the tomb in terror and amazement (16:8). It is worth noting that today's reading begins with the first part of verse 14 ("Jesus showed himself to the Eleven") but omits the rest of the verse in which Jesus reproaches them "for their incredulity and obstinacy because they had refused to believe . . .". This seems a pity given the emphasis Mark puts on the disciples' unbelief throughout his gospel.

The text as it stands is impressively assertive. In spite of their reluctance to believe, the disciples are commissioned to go forth and proclaim the gospel "to the whole creation". They are assured that their preaching will be accompanied by powerful signs. Mark devotes but a single sentence to Jesus' ascension; his focus is on the earthly mission of the disciples. It is as if Jesus had to withdraw to allow the mission to succeed.

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.)