



Feast of the Ascension of the Lord



Date: Sunday, June 2, 2019 | **Season:** Easter | **Year:** C

First Reading: Acts 1:1–11

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 47:2–3, 6–9 | **Response:** Psalm 47:6

Second Reading: Ephesians 1:17–23

Gospel Acclamation: Matthew 28:19a, 20b

Gospel Reading: Luke 24:46–53

Preached at: St Anthony of Padua in Coronationville and St Joseph the Worker in Bosmont in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

In our first reading today we hear the opening lines from the Acts of the Apostles. Our Gospel is also taken from the end of Luke's Gospel. Both the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel of Luke were, we believe, written by the same person and both the Gospel and first reading recount what we celebrate today, Christ's Ascension to the Father in Heaven. Both books were written – if you look at their introductions – to a person called Theophilus, one who loved God. So we are at a bridge moment in the story of the Good News if you will – and as a people who love God we should pay attention: to the end of the story of Jesus and the beginning of the story of his friends and followers – what we eventually can call the church. What is noteworthy in the first reading is the mention of the Holy Spirit – which isn't mentioned much in Scripture so when it is we should take notice – and we see here the role of the Holy Spirit in confirming the apostles as witnesses to Christ's good news. The Holy Spirit is with and in each of us, and though like the disciples we mourn the movement of the Son to the Father, we must realise that it was inevitable. So just as the Holy Trinity saw the suffering and evil in the world and wanted to redeem it and so sent the Son to suffer with us and alongside us – as a sign of their love for us, so too the Son wants to ensure that we are not left alone, and so He returns to the Father in order that they might both send the Holy Spirit to be our comforter and guide.

There is in a real way a sense of completion in today's Feast of the Ascension – a happy ending if you will. A process that started with, on one level, the incarnation and Jesus being born to Mary in a rude stable, something that very much

represented Jesus' humanity, we now see completed in a glorious ascension to heaven – where his divinity and relationship with the Father is most fully revealed. Jesus fully human and fully divine, is the one who promises we will not be alone. And just as Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension are recorded in the Gospel – there is still a whole new book in the Acts of the Apostles, so we know that this good news is not ended – and each of us, I believe, has a part to play in sharing that with those we love and those we find difficult to love.

Our psalm says that the Lord has gone up with trumpet blasts and that his reign is over all peoples. In showing his divinity in this way, though the apostles would have been sad to see Jesus depart – after just having mourned his death and been surprised by his resurrection – they will come to realise, as we do today, that the Son had to return to the Father in order to send the Holy Spirit who is with us all still to this day, and that is why they are joyful. This reign of God, and seeing Jesus as King, seated at the right-hand side of the Father, an image we repeat each time we profess the Creed, is embellished even further in our 2nd reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

So, I think the point is neatly hammered home here: Jesus is the Lord. Jesus the man who walked with the disciples along the shores and beaches, roads and paths; who led them through the valleys and over the hills, who attended the wedding at Cana, who healed the sick – this Jesus, is the Lord who was raised from the dead. Jesus has returned to the Father. But before he went he promised the Disciples, and us, he would send his Holy Spirit, a spirit of wisdom and knowledge of God, to all nations and peoples, with the promise of building a Kingdom here on earth, and joining Him in Heaven later.

Very often we have been stingy in the way we have allowed ourselves to realise how God's spirit is alive and well in the world. Sometimes in the Church there is a temptation to shy away from the world, to retreat and glory in small numbers who are 'pure' or 'orthodox' – but this is not what our Lord did. He encountered people, he engaged with sinners and he sends us out into the world. When we look at today's feast there is also a temptation to keep our eyes fixed on heaven, to be stationary or still as we see the Lord depart... but our mission, our work, is here on earth. We might also be tempted to think that we have a monopoly on God's grace, as if the Holy Spirit works for us! But we know that the work of the Spirit is always living and active and trying to expand our understandings of

Church and we can see the work of the Spirit in all the good works that all humans do – Christians or not, Catholic or not. God’s love is for everyone – and that’s the really good news!

The disciples were tasked to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations, after waiting for the Holy Spirit – and we will celebrate that moment at Pentecost when the Church is truly born. But that’s them. For us – we have already received the Holy Spirit – and so our mission is the same – and can start this morning.

Let us pray that we might recognise the need for our own conversion so that we can preach, as witnesses, convinced witnesses, the good news of Jesus Christ, to the whole world. Let us ask that our feet do not stay transfixed as we stare at Heaven – but that we are able to go to the places that no one else can get to, to preach that message.

Let us also be open to the Holy Spirit who is doing remarkable things in our church and world today. In this vein, I’d like to invite us to pray for Pope Francis – who is renewing and rekindling the spirit of mercy and evangelization in the Church – tearing down the structures of clericalism and rigidity that have tried to imprison the Holy Spirit and instead go to the peripheries, to the lost sheep, to the marginalised and outcast, who thirst to hear God’s Word, a word which is merciful and loving, charitable and true.

I’m reminded of something St Vincent de Paul once said: “To care for the sick is to pray”. Let our prayers be more than words; let our love be in our actions as we care for each other and spread this message of Good News. That yes, Jesus Christ is Lord. Jesus Christ is with the Father. And that all of us here have received the Holy Spirit and can bring a message of love and mercy to everyone we meet.

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