

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD (7th Sunday of Easter) – C

Perhaps strangely we have two accounts of the Ascension both from the hand of Luke. In the gospel reading Luke writes that Jesus took the disciples as far as Bethany on the far side of the Mount of Olives from where he returns to the Father. For Luke Jesus' story began in Jerusalem it must end there. The in first reading, the opening of the Acts of the Apostles, we are not told where the Ascension took place but in the next verse we read, 'So from the mount of Olives...they went back to Jerusalem.' The second reading is from the letter to the Hebrews which teaches that Christ offered himself once to God on the cross and so was able to enter the sanctuary of heaven and 'appear in the actual presence of God on our behalf.'

The **First Reading** is from Acts of the Apostles. This New Testament book is part two of a history of the rise of Christianity, the first part being the gospel according to Luke. They became separated when, about 150 A.D., Christians wanted the four gospel accounts bound together in one volume. The author, Luke, is a Syrian from Antioch, a doctor of non-Jewish origin, who was a close friend of Paul accompanying him on his second and third missionary journeys. Luke collected a great deal of evidence from a variety of sources which he edited. The book deals with the primitive Jerusalem community under Peter's leadership, the spread of Christianity to Samaria, to the gentile peoples and the early days of Christianity in Antioch. From chapter 13 Luke deals with Paul's three missionary journeys and ends with Paul a prisoner in Rome.

The reading, 1.1-11, is from the eleven opening verses of the book and we are introduced to Theophilus again, someone who loves God. Luke gives a brief summary of all that he has recorded in his first book and the summary ends with Jesus saying, 'not many days from now you (the disciples) will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.' Before this can happen Jesus must return to the Father and the disciples, still not understanding, ask if Jesus is about to restore the kingdom to Israel. Jesus gives an evasive answer to their question but says clearly they will soon be clothed with the Holy Spirit and while saying this 'he was lifted up while they looked on.' Now that Jesus has returned to the Father the disciples will be on their own and will need the Holy Spirit. The 'two men in white' who had been in the empty tomb reappear telling the disciples Jesus will return one day.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 46. 2-3,6-9, is an eschatological hymn, a hymn about the end of time when all nations will join the chosen people in proclaiming God as king. The psalm is the first of the psalms of kingship when the king of Israel goes up to Jerusalem in triumph with great acclamation. For us the psalm refers to Jesus ascending to heaven and being received with great joy, an image of the day when all peoples will acknowledge Jesus as king and belong to his kingdom.

The **Second Reading** is from the letter to the Hebrews. This wonderful letter to the Jewish Christians was for a time attributed to Paul's pen but now this is considered not to be the case although he is considered to have had some indirect influence on the letter's contents. It would seem from internal evidence that the letter was written about 67AD. The letter is addressed to Jewish people who have a good knowledge of the covenant God made with their people, and who became Christians. They left Jerusalem and with an uncertain faith, they yearn for the splendour of the ceremonies carried out in the Temple. They are tempted to revert to Judaism, but the writer is intent on preventing this by helping them to see their new life in Christ. They are on a new exodus to the Promised Land (heaven), with Christ, not Moses, as their leader whose one sacrifice on the Cross replaces the many sacrifices of the old priesthood. The letter is a good teaching letter for us showing the harmony between the Old and New Testaments.

The reading, 9.24-28,10.19-23, is in two parts, the first does not deal with the physical ascension of Jesus but teaches about Christ offering himself once and so is able to enter the sanctuary of heaven to plead on our behalf. When Christ sacrificed himself it was his own blood that was poured out in sacrifice. This sacrifice was unique being offered 'at the end of the last age' i.e. it closes a long epoch of preparation, it is the appointed time, and there is no need for the sacrifice to be repeated, since it wiped out sin, not with non-human blood as were the old Temple sacrifices of animals, but with Christ's own blood and its effect is unconditional. The second coming of Christ, unlike the first will have no connection with sin since sin has been abolished and Christians await the end when the Judgement will take place. The second part of the reading tells us we should have confidence because the blood of Christ has given us 'a living opening through the curtain' i.e. the author is making a comparison between the Temple curtain through which only the high priest passed once a year to enter the Holy of Holies (the presence of God) but now all who are faithful will be able to reach God through Christ who is the living opening. All who wish to enter must be sincere in heart, filled with faith, hearts sprinkled and free from any trace of bad conscience and with bodies washed with pure water. We must keep firm in our hope 'because the one who made the promise is trustworthy.' This reading teaches us about the end of the Ascension not Christ being lifted up from the earth.