

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

The gospel reading is the final gathering of the disciples with Jesus in Galilee and the commissioning of the disciples to go out to the whole world preach Christ's message and baptise 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In first reading, the opening of the Acts of the Apostles, we are given an account of the Ascension of Jesus and how 'a cloud (the cloud of God's presence?) took him from their sight.' The second reading is from the passage dealing with the triumph and the supremacy of Christ at the beginning of the letter to the Ephesians.

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, introduces us to Theophilus, 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, and a cloud (the cloud of God's presence?) took him from their sight.' From now on 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 Paul's letter to the Ephesians. If you have time read the whole of this wonderful letter, it's only six chapters long. The letter was written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome (61-63 A.D.) and he follows what he taught in Colossians about the subordinate place of the powers of the universe by teaching that God 'has put all things under his (Christ's) feet and made him the head of the Church which is his Body, the fullness of him who is filled, all in all.' He then deals with the continuous problem of Jew and gentile. Salvation is a gift given by God through Christ and this salvation is available equally to Jew and gentile, this shows something of the infinite wisdom of the mystery of God's inexhaustible love. In the last analysis God's plans are seen to be fulfilled in Christ, and in the Church the extension of Christ through history. This unity in Christ is incompatible with any lack of charity for their attitude to each other is the measure of their attitude to Christ in whom they are all one.

The reading, 1.17-23, follows Paul's long hymn about God's plan of salvation where he explains that 'the message of truth' is for Jew and gentile alike, and Paul continues to thank God for their 'love for all God's people.' Paul continues with what may be described as a prayer for the Ephesians which is where our reading begins, 'May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a spirit of wisdom and perception of what is revealed....' Paul asks that the eyes of their minds be opened so that they will be able to 'see what hope his call holds for you....' Paul goes on to explain this hope saying that it is a rich heritage which has been made possible by the power God exercised by raising Jesus from the dead and enthroning him at his right hand (principle thought of today's feast). This Christ is now, at this present time and in the ages to come, far above every conceivable earthly power. God has put all earthly powers under his feet and he, Christ, is head of the Church, the Church which is his Body, 'the fullness of him' in the sense that the Church includes the whole new creation, that is the rebirth of the whole cosmos, under Christ its ruler and its head. 'All in all' gives the image of its limitless size. We tend to think of Christ bringing new birth to mankind alone but the liturgy makes it clear that the whole cosmos gives praise to God in its renewed state, 'Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of you glory...' The preface for the feast of the Ascension says, 'Therefore, overcome with paschal joy, every land, every people exult in your praise and even the heavenly Powers, with the angelic hosts sing the unending hymn of your glory.'