

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD - B

This final act of the risen Lord leads the Church to spend the coming week in prayer preparing for the gift of the Holy Spirit, promised to the disciples by our Lord. The gospel reading from Mark, this year's evangelist, tells of Jesus commissioning 'the Eleven' to go to the whole world and proclaim the Good News, which we in our turn are commissioned to do. The disciples carry out Jesus' command and he is with them in all they do. The first reading we have a much fuller account of the Ascension by Luke when Jesus tells his disciples that they 'will be baptised with the Holy Spirit' and that Jesus will come again. In the second reading Paul writes to the Ephesians from prison encouraging them to live in the unity of the Spirit and each one is to help in building up the body of Christ according to the gifts received from the Spirit.

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, from the opening verses of the book, is addressed to 'Theophilus', possibly anyone who loves God. Luke explains what he has already written about in his earlier work and says Jesus was taken up into heaven (Lk.24.51). He says Jesus appeared to his disciples for forty days and continued to instruct them and while at the supper table Jesus had told his disciples not to leave Jerusalem until they were 'baptised with the Holy Spirit.' On his last appearance to his disciples they still show a lack of understanding about the true nature of Jesus' mission wondering, 'Has the time come for you to restore the kingdom to Israel?' Jesus tells them 'It is not for you to know times and the dates' i.e. human history is the unfolding of salvation and it develops through the 'times and dates' that God has always foreseen, all the disciples need to know is that they are to be clothed with the Holy Spirit as they begin their mission, just as the Spirit came down on Jesus at his baptism, the beginning of his mission. Then we have a second account of the Ascension, 'a cloud took him from their sight.' We should remember, from the OT, God being present in the cloud and God speaking from the cloud at Jesus' baptism and at the Transfiguration. So the cloud may be seen as the cloud of God's presence with Jesus returning to his Father. The 'two men in white' tell us Jesus will return one day. The scene is set for the advent of the Holy Spirit.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 46.2-3,6-9, is a hymn of praise to God who will come at the end of time as King of all peoples. By clapping their hands, all peoples acclaim the Most High as King of all the earth. The 'men in white' have told us Jesus will come again, and as the people of Israel once thought of God as their King going up to the Temple with their shouts of joy, accompanied by trumpet blast, so now we should think of Jesus both returning to his Father with great acclaim and coming again at the end of time to gather all nations into his Kingdom. Let us sing his praises with all our skill.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. If Paul's letter to the Romans developed the teaching found in Galatians then this letter develops teaching found in Colossians. 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 the Church as the Body of Christ embraces the whole of the new universe, '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 him, all are one.

Today's reading, 4.1-13, is from the second part of the letter where Paul issues a call for unity. He has just spent chapters 2 & 3 explaining how Jew and gentile have been reconciled with each other and with God through Christ's death on the Cross, and now from prison urges them, Jew and gentile, to 'support each other in love.' Loss of peace between Christians threatens the unity of the Church which must acknowledge 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism.' Paul next quotes from scripture referring possibly to Jesus' Ascension and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and if Jesus ascended it was only after he descended into hell (the creed). The gifts, says Paul, are that some should be apostles, others prophets, evangelists, pastors or teachers. Gifts bestowed to help build the unity of faith, until together with Christ we become the perfect Man in contrast to Adam.

