

SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION

By Al Mansfield

Acts 1:1-11

Psalm 47

Ephesians 1:17-23 or 4:1-13

Luke 24:46-53

A MOVABLE FEAST

Thursday or Sunday? Some years ago, I was visiting Vatican City and was present for Ascension Thursday Vespers in St. Peter's Basilica. The following Sunday, however, I attended Mass elsewhere in Rome and the Ascension was celebrated there! The fact is, in many places, even in the Diocese of Rome, the Ascension is now transferred to the Sunday before Pentecost. The mystery, of course, remains the same: After his resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

ACTS

Our first reading is Luke's account of the circumstances leading up to the Ascension. We learn that Jesus appeared to the apostles, instructing them for forty days before his departure. He tells them not to leave Jerusalem but rather to wait there for "the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

Before he goes away from them, Jesus makes still another promise to send the Holy Spirit: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Then Jesus was lifted up on a cloud until he was out of sight.

Two messengers tell the apostles that "This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven."

It is interesting that this narrative in Acts is a much more complete and detailed account than that found in the gospel and prepares us to celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday. The Responsorial, Psalm 47, is very appropriate and descriptive: "God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord."

GOSPEL

The evangelists typically describe the great events in Jesus' life essentially the same but with their own distinctive nuances. So it is with the Ascension in today's gospel.

St. Luke recounts that Jesus appears to the apostles and commissions them to preach "repentance, for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus also promises to send the Holy Spirit: "And behold I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." Luke describes this coming of the Spirit at Pentecost in great detail in Acts 2.

Jesus leads the apostles to Bethany, on the Mount of Olives, blesses them, and is taken up to heaven. The apostles worshipped him, then returned to Jerusalem and "were continually in the temple praising God." It is interesting that St. Luke makes no record of Jesus' forty days of post-resurrection appearances, whereas he makes it a point to mention this in the Acts, which he also wrote.

EPHESIANS

Options are given for today's second reading. The first option, Ephesians 1:17-23, alludes to Psalm 110:1, declaring that God seated Christ "at his right hand in the heavenly places." It adds, quoting Psalm 8:6, that God "put all things under his feet."

Another option is Ephesians 4:1-13, which quotes Psalm 68:18 to read, "He ascended on high and took prisoners captive; he gave gifts to men." It then mentions some of the foundational gifts needed to minister in the Church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. These are essential gifts of the Holy Spirit to build up the Body of Christ on earth.

AN INTERESTING FEAST

For such a significant mystery in the life and ministry of Christ, it is somewhat curious that the Ascension does not seem to receive much emphasis in the gospels. It is not mentioned at all in Matthew. In John, the Ascension is alluded to (cf. 3:13; 6:62; 20:17), but the event itself is not described. Both Mark and Luke treat the Ascension in one sentence as they conclude their gospels, with no reference to forty days of post-resurrection appearances.

As mentioned above, only the account in Acts, also written by Luke, gives more details, especially that Jesus will return in the same way as he was taken up into heaven. Amen, Come Lord Jesus! May we all be found watching and waiting.