

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Ascension of the Lord

Year B

12 May 2024



Collect

Gladden us with holy joys, almighty God,
and make us rejoice with devout thanksgiving,
for the Ascension of Christ your Son
is our exaltation,
and, where the Head has gone before in glory,
the Body is called to follow in hope.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

In his parting words in Matthew's gospel, Jesus declares, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." The author of the letter to the Ephesians is more expansive. Christ is "above every Sovereignty, Authority, Power, or Domination . . . not only in this age but in the age to come." These absolute claims once disarmed the powers of pagan gods and the Roman emperor. Ever since they have put the imperious demands of all worldly authorities on notice.

Nonetheless they pose a serious challenge for Christian believers. In a world of brute force, despotic rulers, economic exploitation, technological disruption and ecological vandalism, what are we to make of the authority of Christ? In an era where the moral authority of the Church has been severely shaken by major cultural shifts and especially the sexual abuse crisis, how can Christ be claimed as the ultimate authority?

At the global level, Christians face a test of collective faith. They are being reminded more than ever that Jesus' path to universal lordship was by way of the cross. It was by being dispossessed of everything, even of his life, that Jesus was freed to reign. At the local level, believers would be wise to take note of every occasion where love, truth, beauty and goodness prevail. These are precious moments of grace that feed our faith.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11

In my earlier work, *Theophilus*, I dealt with everything Jesus had done and taught from the beginning until the day he gave his instructions to the apostles he had chosen through the Holy Spirit, and was taken up to heaven. He had shown himself alive to them after his Passion by many demonstrations: for forty days he had continued to appear to them and tell them about the kingdom of God. When he had been at table with them, he had told them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for what the Father had promised. 'It is' he had said 'what you have heard me speak about: John baptised with water but you, not many days from now, will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.'

Now having met together, they asked him, 'Lord, has the time come? Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know times or dates that the Father has decided by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth.'

As he said this he was lifted up while they looked on, and a cloud took him from their sight. They were still staring into the sky when suddenly two men in white were standing near them and they said, 'Why are you men from Galilee standing here looking into the sky? Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, this same Jesus will come back in the same way as you have seen him go there.'

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 46:2-3, 6-9

R. God mounts his throne to shouts of joy:
a blare of trumpets for the Lord.
or

R. Alleluia.

All peoples, clap your hands,
cry to God with shouts of joy!
For the Lord, the Most High, we must fear,
great king over all the earth. R.

God goes up with shouts of joy;
the Lord goes up with trumpet blast.
Sing praise for God, sing praise,
sing praise to our king, sing praise. R.

God is king of all the earth.
Sing praise with all your skill.
God is king over the nations;
God reigns on his holy throne. R.

First Reading

There is an interesting difference of detail between Luke's gospel and the Acts with regard to the ascension. In the gospel the ascension appears to take place at the end of Easter Day (24:50-53); in the Acts it occurs forty days later. In his gospel Luke (like John) presents the Easter mystery as a unified event, comprising resurrection, ascension and sending of the Spirit. In Acts it suits his purpose to highlight each phase separately, allowing time for the disciples' experience to mature. The number forty, of course, has a fine biblical pedigree.

Today's reading begins with a dedication to Theophilus that parallels the one in the gospel (1:3) and continues to reinforce the author's claim to literary respectability. Luke then proceeds to populate the forty days with Jesus' appearances and instructions. In spite of the apostles still expecting him "to restore the kingdom to Israel," Jesus gives them a mandate to be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth." This one verse encapsulates Luke's agenda for the whole book. Geographically it culminates in Rome, but temporally it extends until Jesus returns "in the same way you have seen him go."

The reading falls into three parts. The first is Luke's formal introduction and resumé of the post-resurrection interlude. The second is Jesus' final interaction with the apostles, and the third is Luke's account of the ascension. The variety of material – reporting, instruction, dialogue and action – make this an interesting text for readers to proclaim and for the assembly to engage with.

Responsorial Psalm

The feast of the Ascension is the only occasion when Psalm 46/47 is used for a Sunday or feast day. It celebrates God's sovereignty not just over Israel but all peoples of the earth. It may or may not have accompanied a liturgical rite, but all the elements of such a ceremony are present. The clapping, shouting, trumpet-sounding and singing suggest a festive procession.

In the Christian tradition references to the Lord going up and reigning on a holy throne have been interpreted as referring to Jesus' ascension, hence its use today. The phrase "God goes up" in the second stanza has been rendered "God mounts his throne" in the response.

Many psalms call on those present to sing praise to God, but this one makes a special claim for musical rendition. Failing that, the onus is on readers to proclaim it with exuberance. They will need to take special care when they announce the unfamiliar, two-part response. It calls for an upward inflection on "shouts of joy" followed by a moment's pause before the remainder is proceeded with. Readers may need to repeat it with the assembly after the first verse.

**A reading from the letter of St Paul
to the Ephesians**

1:17–23

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a spirit of wisdom and perception of what is revealed, to bring you to full knowledge of him. May he enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see what hope his call holds for you, what rich glories he has promised the saints will inherit and how infinitely great is the power that he has exercised for us believers. This you can tell from the strength of his power at work in Christ, when he used it to raise him from the dead and to make him sit at his right hand, in heaven, far above every Sovereignty, Authority, Power, or Domination, or any other name that can be named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come. He has put all things under his feet, and made him as the ruler of everything, the head of the Church; which is his body, the fullness of him who fills the whole creation.

Alternative Second Reading

**A reading from the letter of St Paul
to the Ephesians**

4:1–13

I, the prisoner in the Lord, implore you to lead a life worthy of your vocation. Bear with one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness and patience. Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together. There is one Body, one Spirit, just as you were all called into one and the same hope when you were called. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, over all, through all and within all. Each one of us, however, has been given his own share of grace, given as Christ allotted it. [It was said that he would: When he ascended to the height, he captured prisoners, he gave gifts to men.

When it says, 'he ascended', what can it mean if not that he descended right down to the lower regions of the earth?]

The one who rose higher than all the heavens to fill all things is none other than the one who descended. And to some, his gift was that they should be apostles; to some, prophets; to some, evangelists; to some, pastors and teachers; so that the saints together make a unity in the work of service, building up the body of Christ. In this way we are all to come to unity in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God, until we become the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself.

[*Short Form: omit text in brackets.*]

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Mark**

16:15–20

Jesus showed himself to the Eleven, and said to them, 'Go out to the whole world, proclaim the Good News to all creation. He who believes and is baptised will be saved; he who does not believe will be condemned. These are the signs that will be associated with believers: in my name they will cast out devils; they will have the gift of tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and be unharmed should they drink deadly poison; they will lay their hands on the sick, who will recover.'

And so the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven: there at the right hand of God he took his place, while they, going out, preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word by the signs that accompanied it.

Second Reading

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is evenly divided between teaching (chs 1-3) and exhortation (chs 4-6). In the optional reading for Year B (4:1-13), we hear the opening verses of the exhortation. This in turn falls into two halves. The first is a litany of unity, the second a catalogue of diversity. The community is one Body, one Spirit, united under one Lord and one Father by one hope, faith and baptism. At the same time the baptised are many and varied. They are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. These themes of unity and diversity recur in other letters of Paul's.

The reason why this passage has been chosen for the feast of the Ascension is clearer in the longer version than the shorter one. Paul cites and interprets a psalm verse (67/68:19) in terms of the ascension. Its original purpose was to praise God who is exalted on high and given tribute for conquering the enemy. Paul applies this to Christ who has overcome and taken captive the powers of this world. But he changes the psalm text to have Christ bestow gifts on human beings, not receive tribute himself. Paul then embarks on a creative but obscure line of thought about descent. This unclarity remains, but is greatly lessened, in the shorter version, making it the preferable one to use.

Both options retain Paul's helpful saying that Christ "rose higher than all the heavens to fill all things." This captures the fruitful ambiguity of the ascension. It is at the same time a departure from this world and an enduring presence throughout it.

Readers will need to note the character of the passage. It's an appeal. It should be delivered in a positive and persuasive tone of voice. The litanies of unity and diversity should be pronounced with deliberation, not rushed through. The last sentence brings the reading to an inspiring conclusion.

Gospel

Most scholars agree that Mark's gospel ends enigmatically at 16:8. The faithful women who go to the tomb on Easter morn are terrified by the sight of the white-clad figure in the tomb. Instead of conveying the message he gives them to Peter and the disciples, they run away and tell no-one. It seems that the early Church felt it necessary to add an entirely positive conclusion to the gospel consistent with the others. It has much in common with them, resulting in a language and style different from the rest of Mark's gospel.

Today's reading is the second half of this addendum. Like the Acts of the Apostles, it testifies both to Jesus' ascension and to the mission of the apostles. In fact, the author is so keen to stress the impressive power they wielded that not only do they perform exorcisms and healings like Jesus but are also able to withstand harm from deadly snakes and poison. All this is claimed in spite of the unbelief that provokes Jesus to reprimand them again, at this late juncture (see the omission from verse 14).

As was the case with Ephesians, there's a dialectic of absence and presence in the text. Jesus has taken his place at the right hand of God in heaven, yet "the Lord" is present and powerful in the work of the apostles. This ending to Mark's gospel may be a later addition but it is fully in accord with the other synoptics and above all with Luke-Acts. It may be proclaimed with confidence.

An alternative translation of the scripture readings is given here from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). This may be particularly useful for those in parishes which use the NRSV Lectionary.

ASCENSION OF THE LORD

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles

1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus,
I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught
from the beginning
until the day when he was taken up to heaven,
after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit
to the Apostles whom he had chosen.
After his suffering he presented himself alive to them
by many convincing proofs,
appearing to them during forty days
and speaking about the kingdom of God.
While staying with them,
he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem,
but to wait there for the promise of the Father.
“This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me;
for John baptized with water,
but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit
not many days from now.”
So when they had come together, they asked him,
“Lord, is this the time when you will restore
the kingdom to Israel?”
He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods
that the Father has set by his own authority.
But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,
in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”
When he had said this, as they were watching,
he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.
While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven,
suddenly two men in white robes stood by them
They said, “Men of Galilee
why do you stand looking up toward heaven?
This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven,
will come in the same way
as you saw him go into heaven.”

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians 1:17-23

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the Father of glory,
may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation
as you come to know him,
so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened,
you may know what is the hope to which he has called you,
what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints,
and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power
for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.
God put this power to work in Christ
when he raised him from the dead
and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,
far above all rule and authority and power and dominion,

and above every name that is named,
not only in this age but also in the age to come.
And he has put all things under his feet
and has made him the head over all things for the church,
which is his body,
the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Alternative Second Reading

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians 4:1–13

I, the prisoner in the Lord,
beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling
to which you have been called,
with all humility and gentleness, with patience,
bearing with one another in love,
making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit
in the bond of peace

There is one body and one Spirit,
just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,
one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
one God and Father of all,
who is above all and through all and in all.
But each of us was given grace
according to the measure of Christ's gift.

[Therefore it is said,
"When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;
he gave gifts to his people."

When it says, "He ascended,"
what does it mean but that he had also descended
into the lower parts of the earth?
He who descended is the same one who ascended
far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.]

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles,
some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,
to equip the saints for the work of ministry,
for building up the body of Christ,
until all of us come to the unity of the faith
and of the knowledge of the Son of God,
to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 16:15–20

Jesus appeared to the eleven, and he said to them,
"Go into all the world
and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.
The one who believes and is baptized will be saved;
but the one who does not believe will be condemned.
And these signs will accompany those who believe:
by using my name they will cast out demons;
they will speak in new tongues;
they will pick up snakes in their hands,
and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them;
they will lay their hands on the sick,
and they will recover."
So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them,
was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.
And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere,
while the Lord worked with them
and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

Blessing for Ascension

May almighty God bless us,
for on this very day his Only Begotten Son
pierced the heights of heaven
and unlocked for us the way
to ascend to where he is.

Amen.

May he grant that,
as Christ after his Resurrection
was seen plainly by his disciples,
so when he comes as Judge
he may show himself merciful to us for all eternity.

Amen.

And may we, who believe he is seated
with the Father in his majesty,
know with joy the fulfilment of his promise
to stay with you until the end of time.

Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.

Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for The Ascension of the Lord, Roman Missal p 713.)