

Readings for Ascension Sunday

29th May 2022

First Reading: Acts 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: Ephesians 1:15-23

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. 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.

Gospel: St Luke 24:44-53

Jesus said to the disciples, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

A Reflection for Ascension Sunday

One of the great joys of life when I have some spare time on my hands, or when I am on holiday, is to browse in bookshops. I love reading and there are just so many fascinating books out there. Sometimes I search out favourite authors. Other times, I look for new gems in genres that I enjoy. Flicking through the pages, perhaps reading the opening paragraphs or the comments on the cover, give a tantalising glimpse of what a book is about and whether or not it might tempt me.

In ancient times, when books were on scrolls rather than in convenient bound volumes, it wasn't possible to browse through them in the same way. The only bit that could be seen was the opening sentences, so these were critical for introducing or summarising what the whole book was about. They needed to draw the reader in, make them want all of it, and, at the same time, set the work in the wider context of its relationship with other texts. That is what we have in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The opening sentences indicate that it is a continuation of the narrative of the previous book, the Gospel of Luke, the last verses of which formed our Gospel reading today. The opening of Acts creates a bridge with the Gospel as it summarises the events of Jesus' Passion, resurrection and ascension, before continuing the story of God's ongoing activity in the world through Jesus' followers.

Scholars generally agree that the Luke and Acts have a common author, most probably Luke the physician who accompanied Paul on his journeys at times and is referred to in several of Paul's letters. Both the Gospel and Acts are addressed to 'Theophilus'. We don't know who Theophilus was, and it was a common name. Possibly it is symbolic since Theophilus means 'dear to God' or 'lover of God'. However, since the opening of Luke's Gospel refers to 'most excellent Theophilus', it is thought that he was more likely to have been an individual and probably of some status; 'most excellent' was often used to address Roman political officials. From the opening of the Gospel, we know that he knew something of the events of Jesus' life but whether or not he was a Christian is uncertain.

In his works, Luke gives two accounts of Jesus' ascension, one at the end of the Gospel and the other at the beginning of Acts, both of which we have today. The ascension provides the link between the two books: it is the fulfilment of Jesus' earthly ministry and the commencement of his continued mission to the world through his followers.

In the forty days since Easter, the disciples have had what must have been a bewildering time as Jesus has made a number of resurrection appearances. Now, prior to his ascension, the Gospel tells us Jesus' final earthly gift to them is that of understanding. We are told he 'opened their mind to understand the scriptures', referring to Moses, the prophets and the psalms, the three constituent parts of the Hebrew Bible. Jesus explains how those scriptures are fulfilled in his suffering, in his rising from the dead on the third day, and in the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness to all nations, this last being the task that his disciples will continue. This teaching and Jesus' ascension was a profound moment of transition for the disciples as they came to an understanding of Jesus' death and of God's plans for the future that started with them. The full impact is probably lost on us as we receive the benefit of 2000 years of theological reflection and discussion of these events.

It is tempting to think of the ascension as the moment of Jesus' departure and, by implication, of his subsequent absence from the earth, but that is to misunderstand it. Jesus will continue to be with his followers, but in a different way. He remains an active, living presence in their lives and in the narrative that follows in the book of Acts.

The 16th century theologian, Martin Luther, described the ascension as 'something active, energetic and continuous'. He went on: 'Had he remained upon earth in visible form, ... all the people could not have been with him and heard him. Therefore, [by his ascension] he ... made it possible for him to be in touch with all and reign in all, to preach to all and be heard by all, and to be with all. Therefore, beware lest you imagine within yourself that he has gone, and now is, far away from us. The very opposite is true: While he was on earth, he was far away from us; now he is very near.'

Jesus' final instruction to the disciples before his ascension is to wait until they receive the promised Holy Spirit, the power from on high as the Gospel puts it. Just as Luke describes Jesus receiving the Holy Spirit at his baptism, before he began his earthly ministry, so too his followers need that gift. It is in the power of the Holy Spirit that they will be able to continue God's mission in the world, to be God's witnesses 'in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth', as Acts puts it.

So the ascension is not a departure but an enthroning, not an exit, but rather a glorification. Elsewhere in Acts, and in today's reading from Ephesians, we are told that Jesus is seated at God's right hand. From there, he continues to accompany and empower his followers. It is a promise that is as true today as it was for his first followers as we are called to continue that task as God's witnesses in the world.

I'd like to conclude with a poem by one my favourite modern Christian poets, a poem I discovered through that great pleasure of being able to browse through a book:

Ascension Day by *Malcolm Guite*

We saw his light break through the cloud of glory
whilst we were rooted still in time and place,
as earth became part of heaven's story
and heaven opened to his human face.
We saw him go and yet we were not parted,
he took us with him to the heart of things,
the heart that broke for all the broken-hearted
is whole and heaven-centred now, and sings;
sings in the strength that rises out of weakness,
sings through the clouds that veil him from our sight,
whilst we ourselves become his clouds of witness
and sing the waning darkness into light;
his light in us, and ours in him concealed,
which all creation waits to see revealed.