

The Ascension of the Lord (Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 1:1-11
<i>Response</i>	God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 1:17-23
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Go and teach all nations, says the Lord; I am with you always, until the end of the world.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 16:15-20

The Solemnity of the Ascension for Year B takes us to the ending of the Gospel of Mark, an ending known as the longer ending of the Gospel of Mark, which gives us a very brief account of Jesus's ascension into heaven. This is in Mark 16:15-20. So, before I read this, just a quick note about it. This passage is interesting because it comes from a section of Mark's Gospel called the longer ending because there are a couple of different forms of the ending in the ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark. So some of the many ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark will end with verse 8, where the women go out from the tomb and they don't say anything to anyone because they were afraid. Other copies of the ancient manuscripts of Mark have a longer ending, verses 9 all the way down through 20. And although there is scholarly debate about the exact textual history of this longer ending of Mark, you should know that the Church regards the longer ending of Mark as canonical scripture, whatever its precise textual history or textual origin. And so the quotation for today is from this longer ending of Mark, which is often...It's a passage that often isn't read, but it's a very fascinating one. So let's look at what it says for today. Mark 16:15-20 says:

And he said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, 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 forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it.¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Several aspects of this passage are really significant. Number one, notice you basically have the Markan version of the Great Commission. So in the Gospel of Matthew, the Great Commission is very famous. Jesus says, you know, go into all nations, preach the good news to them, teaching them what I've taught you and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Here, Jesus tells the disciples, not only do you go into all nations, but go to the whole creation, right? There's a cosmic dimension to the mission of Jesus and the commissioning of the disciples. So this is the cosmic commission, so to speak, to the whole creation. A second element of this passage that is significant is the necessity of baptism for salvation. You see here that Jesus says to the Apostles:

He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.

So we see again in Mark's Gospel, in a shorter version, but the same emphasis on baptism as being an essential part of the mission, of the Apostolic mission of the disciples. So that faith and baptism, "he who believes and is baptized will be saved. But whoever does not believe will be condemned." So this is going to be an important theme in Mark's Gospel that we saw earlier. If you go back and read through the Gospel of Mark, faith or belief in Jesus is extremely important in the Gospel of Mark. Over and over and over again, Jesus emphasizes, "your faith has saved you." He'll say that to the woman with the hemorrhage that he heals, "your faith has saved you." So the importance of belief. But not just belief, Baptism as well in this passage.

The next element of the passage, and this is the part of it that I think grabs most people's attention, is the list of these signs that are going to accompany the Apostles as they go out and preach the gospel. There are basically five signs here: exorcisms, so they are going to cast out demons; tongues, they are going to speak in new languages; picking up serpents and yet not being harmed by them; drinking any deadly thing, which appears to refer to a poison, and yet not being harmed; and then finally healings, laying hands on the sick and they will recover. Now if you look at each one of these signs, the one that sticks out for most people is the picking up serpents in their hands. because at least in an American context, we tend to think about...there are certain Christian sects in the United States that have become very famous because they are snake handlers and so there are certain groups of Christians, usually located in the Appalachians, that practice picking up snakes, poisonous snakes, as part of their demonstration of faith in God's ability to protect them from any harm. And so many people will link this verse with that modern phenomena, but we want to always be sure that we understand the text in the New Testament not in modern context, first and foremost, but in their ancient context. And so if you look at the signs that are being listed here, these actually shouldn't be too surprising to you if you've read the rest of the New Testament, because they're going to occur in descriptions of the Apostolic mission and Apostolic ministry of the followers of Jesus in the book of Acts in particular, but also in some early Christian writings outside the Bible.

So let me just kind of walk through and give you a few examples of this. So, for example, the first thing it says is that the apostles of Jesus will be able to cast out demons. And sure enough, if you go to the Book of Acts in Acts 16 and Acts 19, St. Paul, for example, does what Jesus does. He casts out demons from people who are possessed. The second sign is speaking in tongues. This one's pretty obvious because, again, if you go to the Acts of the Apostles in Acts 2, one of the principal visible signs that they've received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is that they are able to speak in tongues. And if you look at Acts 2 in context, you can go read through verses 1-11 in particular, it's very clear that the gift of speaking in tongues, in that context, the new tongues they receive are the languages of all the various pilgrims who have come from around the world to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, where the pilgrims actually say, "each one of us hears them speaking to us in our own tongue, in our own language." So there, the gift of tongues is tied to the ability of the Apostles to speak to the nations in order to preach the gospel to various nations of the world, despite the barrier of the multiple languages of human beings.

The third sign here of being able to pick up serpents is actually one that people tend to overlook, but it too can be found in the book of Acts. So, for example, if you have your Bible, you can just turn real quick to the Book of Acts 28:1-6. It tells the story of Paul landing on the island of Malta, and while he's gathered a bundle of sticks to put on a fire, according to Acts 28:3, it says:

a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand.

So it bit him.

When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live." He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm.

This is again one of the signs. He is bitten by a deadly serpent, but it does not harm him, even though the natives who would have known which snakes were poisonous expect him to die. And then finally, healings. It says they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover. Jesus says that in the ending of Mark here about his apostles. And sure enough, if you go again to the Book of Acts 28, for example, we see Saint Paul performing a sign in verse 8, where it says:

that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery; and Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him healed him.

So basically what's happening, or what Mark's describing here at this ending, is that the Apostles are going to have certain powers to perform signs that are witnesses to their supernatural commissioning from Christ. Now, one of the things I left out here is of course their ability to drink any poison. Now, I don't know, at least I can think of any text in the New Testament, where that is enacted in the Apostolic activity of the early Church, where they're given poison and protected from. However, if you look at the writings of the early Church Fathers, it is interesting

that certain descriptions of the missionary activity of the Apostoles do, in fact, contain some accounts of these kinds of signs. So here I'm drawing on Adele Yarbrough Collins' commentary on the Gospel of Mark. I'm just going to give you two examples from the early Church Fathers that she cites. The first one is from St. Irenaeus of Lyon. He was a second-century Church Father, very prominent, and he wrote a book, *Against Heresies*, where he talks about the power of apostolic signs as a motive for credibility in evangelization. So he says this:

Wherefore, also, those who are in truth His disciples, receiving grace from Him, do in His name perform [miracles], so as to promote the welfare of other men, according to the gift which each one has received from Him. For some do certainly and truly drive out devils, so that those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently both believe [in Christ], and join themselves to the Church. Others have foreknowledge of things to come: they see visions, and utter prophetic expressions. Others still, heal the sick by laying their hands upon them, and they are made whole. Yea, moreover, as I have said, the dead even have been raised up, and remained among us for many years.²

Irenaeus is writing basically just one generation after the Apostolic period. So he is around 180 AD. He was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of St. John. And so what Irenaeus is saying is that evidence of these miraculous signs that some of the apostles engaged in, such as resurrections from the dead, are still witnessed in his own day and some of the people who were raised are alive at his own time period. So these are kind of visible motives of credibility for believing the Gospels. The one other passage that was interesting to me is one of the early Christian writers named Papias, who's quoted by another early Christian writer—Papias too was a disciple of John—is described as follows. It says:

Papias related, as something he had heard from the daughters of Philip, that Barsabas, who was also called Justus, when he was being put to the test by the unbelievers, drank a viper's poison in the name of Christ and was preserved unhurt. He also relates other marvellous stories.³

This is from Philip of Side, one of the fragments of this early Christian writer named Philip. So in other words, we do have Apostolic writers from the period of the Apostolic Fathers, like Papius, who was a disciple of John, or Irenaeus, who was a disciple of a disciple of John, within the living memory of the apostles, who bear witness to the kinds of signs and wonders that we see described in the Gospel reading for today as something that was part of the early missionary activity of the church and was a motive of credibility for believing the gospel in the early

² Irenaeus of Lyon, 'Against Heresies, Book II, Chapter 32', *New Advent*, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103232.htm> (accessed 16 January 2024).

³ 'Fragments of Philip of Side', Tertullian, https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/philip_of_side_fragments.htm (accessed 16 January 2024).

generations of its spread throughout the Greco-Roman world. All right, so that's a little side note of the signs in the Gospel of Mark. A lot of people do wonder about that verse so I just wanted to kind of flesh it out for you so you see that each of the signs listed there is witnessed to either in the writings in the New Testament about the acts of the Apostles, or in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers with regard to descriptions of early Christian missionary activity.

But the solemnity today is about the ascension of Jesus, so let's at least say one last thing about that. The account of Jesus' ascension in the longer ending of Mark is an interesting text because it actually doesn't use the language of ascension, it uses the language of assumption, although most English translations don't really communicate that. So it says:

the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven...

Analambanō is the Greek word and it literally means received up, He was taken up, but it gets translated into Latin as *assumptus*. So this is where we get the language of being assumed into heaven, which we tend to use just for the Blessed Virgin Mary, and we make a distinction traditionally between the Assumption of Mary and the Ascension of Jesus, because Jesus goes up into heaven by his own power, whereas Mary is taken up into heaven by the power of God. It is important to note that the New Testament itself uses both kinds of language for Jesus as well. On the one hand, you can speak about him ascending through his own power, on the other hand, the New Testament does also speak of him, his humanity, as being assumed into heaven by the Father. So both aspects of the mystery are true there. And after that assumption into heaven, he sits down at the right hand of God. So that's the Gospel reading for today. The first reading is the reading that's always used on the Solemnity of the Ascension, and we've read it in other contexts, so we don't need to go into it in too much detail, but it's basically the first 11 verses of the book of Acts. It's the account of the ascension of Jesus. And so let me just make a few points about it. Number one, notice that the Ascension takes place after 40 days, so there's a 40 day period of transition between the resurrection and the ascension, which is a standard biblical image for a time of transition. The Apostles are transitioning from the time of the resurrection to the time of the ascension and that period is one of 40 days.

The second aspect of this passage that I think is interesting is that if you look in Acts 1:9, it too uses the image of Jesus being lifted up or brought up into heaven. So in verse nine it says:

when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

So again, the Greek here is *analambanō* and the Latin is *assumptus*. So Jesus is assumed into heaven on the day of the Ascension. So just an interesting difference there that might be worth noting because both things are true. He both ascends by his own power and is taken up in this glorious cloud into heaven and out of the disciples' sight. And then finally, and this is important, the last verse there, the angel says to the disciples:

This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.

This is important because it shows that the Ascension of Jesus into glory is not the end of the story, because precisely from the same heavenly realm into which he enters, he will one day return in the parousia. So there's a sense in which the Ascension of Jesus into heaven is a kind of anticipation of the glory that will be revealed at his final parousia. So you could make the case that in a sense the Apostles here see in a very local and restricted way, Christ ascending to his heavenly throne in glory, what all of the world and all nations in the entire cosmos will witness at the parousia when he comes on the clouds with the angels of heaven in the glory of his final Advent. So there's an eschatological dimension to the Ascension of Jesus as well, which makes it very fitting as a solemnity, as a feast, that the Church celebrates each year of his final and definitive entry into glory, into heaven, before his second coming at the end of time. And sure enough, that's how the Church interprets this feast as the Catechism of the Catholic Church says in paragraph 663-664:

Henceforth Christ is *seated at the right hand of the Father*: “By ‘the Father’s right hand’ we understand the glory and honor of divinity, where he who exists as Son of God before all ages, indeed as God, of one being with the Father, is seated bodily after he became incarnate and his flesh was glorified.” *Being seated at the Father’s right hand signifies the inauguration of the Messiah’s kingdom...*

Very important point. The Ascension tells us that we don't have to wait until the end of time for the Kingdom of God to come, because in the Ascension., the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, has already been inaugurated when Christ was assumed and sat at the right hand of God the Father. And from that place, from that right hand, he will once again come in his parousia to judge the living and the dead.