

The Ascension of the Lord

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 1:1-11
<i>Response</i>	God mount his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 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>	Matthew 28:16-20

Today's Sunday in the Easter season is a little different than other Sundays. Although technically it is the Seventh Sunday of Easter, in most dioceses of the United States the Solemnity of the Ascension is actually being celebrated on this Sunday. Now if you look at the calendar, you'll see that traditionally the Solemnity of the Ascension is celebrated on Ascension Thursday, 40 days after the resurrection of Jesus, however, because it's often moved to Sunday, in this video we are actually going to focus on the readings for the feast of the Ascension. So today we will be looking at the Solemnity of the Ascension of Jesus into heaven for Year A. Now before we do that I want to say something here about the Ascension itself. Before we look at the scriptural readings, it is important to remember just what we are going to be reflecting on in these readings. The catechism has an excellent section on the mystery of the Ascension. It's in paragraphs 645-663, and in that section the Catechism makes a few key points about the mystery of the Ascension that we want to keep in mind before we look at the readings themselves. Number one, although most of us don't think that often about the Ascension, it is one of the articles of the Apostle's Creed: "he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." That's one of the most ancient articles of faith that we have as Catholics, going all the way back to the Apostle's Creed. So obviously, as an article of faith this is something we want to ponder, we want to reflect upon, and we want to draw out the significance of for our Christian lives.

Second, it is important to recall that the Ascension is a distinct event from the resurrection of Jesus. Sometimes these can get blurred in people's minds. It is

very important to remember that the resurrection is the reunification, the reunion, of Jesus' body and soul into a new glorified state, and that happens on Easter Sunday. However, the Ascension, which takes place 40 days later, is, as the Catechism says, "the irreversible entry of Jesus' humanity into divine glory." So it's a distinct event in terms of time, but also in terms of significance. And third and finally, as we will see in a minute — this is really important — the Ascension of Jesus is a bodily event. It's not just the ascension of his soul into heaven — like our souls might go to heaven after we die — it's the entry of his soul and his body into glory, as the catechism says in paragraph 663, Christ is "seated bodily at the right hand of the Father." That's what we mean when we say in the Apostle's Creed, "he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." So with those basic doctrinal points in mind, let's turn now to the readings for today's Mass. And as usual, we will begin with the Gospel. In this case, because it's Year A, the Gospel reading is from the book of Matthew. It's the final verses of the Gospel of Matthew, and this is what we read:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."¹

Now you might be thinking here, "why we are reading the account of the great commission on the feast of the Ascension? Where is the Ascension in the passage we just read?" The answer is really simple. It is because there is no account of the Ascension in the Gospel of Matthew. And although we are in Year A, and we are working through the Gospel, what the Church does instead is it gives us the account of Jesus' great commission to the Apostles and of this promise of being with them always. So there is the real link and we are going to come back to that, because it seems like that, in a sense, this contradicts the Ascension. Jesus says "I

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.

am with you always, even to the end of time” (or “even to the end of the age”), and then 40 days later he's going to ascend into heaven, he is going to leave them behind. So how does that go together? So in this case the Church wants us to read the Gospel of Matthew alongside the account of the Ascension in the Acts of the Apostles. So you will have noticed that throughout the Easter season, instead of reading the Old Testament, we always begin with the book of Acts. Well that's still true for today on the feast of the Ascension. So the first reading for today is where we actually get the account of Jesus' Ascension, and that's in Acts of the Apostles 1. Let's turn there for just a minute and we will read Luke's account of the Ascension, because it is really Luke, and Luke alone in the Acts of the Apostles, that gives us a full account of the timeframe between the resurrection and the ascension, and then the narrative of what happened on that day of the Ascension with the most details for us to reflect on. So it's the first 11 verses of the Acts of the Apostles, and this is Luke's account:

In the first book, O The-oph'ilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Sama'ria and to the end of the earth." And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

There are a number of things that stand out as you read Luke's account of the Ascension. Number one, the timeframe. Notice that Luke makes very clear that this takes place 40 days after the resurrection of Jesus. So the first question we would have is what is the significance of the 40 days? The second thing that's important, notice that when Jesus goes up into heaven, when he is taken up into heaven, he is taken up to heaven in a cloud. So why is that the case? What is the significance of the cloud? For example, you might think in the Old Testament of 2 Kings 1, where we have an account of Elijah going up into heaven in a chariot of fire. So what's the significance of Jesus ascending into heaven on a cloud? Why isn't it in a chariot of fire or why doesn't he just disappear? What's the reason for the cloud? And then third and finally, and this is really important, what does it even mean to say Jesus ascended into heaven? What does heaven mean? What would it have meant to the Apostles, to a first century Jew, to say he went up into heaven? So let's look at each one of those for just a second.

Number one, the first point I want to make here is about the 40 days. If you read the New Testament in light of the Old Testament, you will notice that the number 40 is a very significant number. And whenever you see the number 40, especially 40 days and 40 nights, it always refers to two things. It's a time of transition and it is a time of purification and preparation. You might think, "well where do you get that from?" First of all, if you look at Genesis 7 and 8, what you will see is that the 40 days and 40 nights of the flood are a time of purification from sin. So the world is being cleansed and purified of sin and the violence that led to the flood. But it's also a time of transition from the period before the flood to the time after the flood, and there are going to be major changes in the covenant between before the flood and after the flood with Noah — like in the permission to eat meat and the shortening of the lifespan of human beings. Secondly, if you look at the book of Exodus, the Israelites spend 40 years in the wilderness. So what is that? Well that is a time of purification, God is purifying them from the sins that they had committed when they were in Egypt, and He is also preparing them. They are transitioning into life in the promised land. And then finally, of course, there is the New Testament itself. If you look at Jesus' 40 days and 40 nights in the desert, he goes out into the desert to be tempted, to be tested in order to prepare and transition into his public ministry, where he is going to begin performing miracles.

So that's what 40 always does: purification, transition, preparation, those things. So if you look at the 40 days after the resurrection, what is Jesus doing? Well he's preparing the disciples for his departure in the Ascension, but he is also purifying them of their misunderstandings about the nature of the kingdom. So they're telling him "Lord, is it this time? Is this the time where you are going to restore the kingdom of Israel?" They seem to almost still be waiting for a kind of earthly manifestation of the restoration of Israel and the kingdom of God, and what Jesus says to them is "it is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has fixed. You stay in the city and wait to be clothed with the power of the Holy Spirit." That's how the kingdom is going to come in them, it is in a way that they didn't expect. And we will look more at that when we get to the feast of Pentecost, but for now that's the significance of the 40 days: purification, preparation and then transition.

Well what about Jesus being taken up into heaven in a cloud? What is the significance of the cloud? If you go back to ancient Church Fathers like St. John Chrysostom, he was the Bishop of Constantinople, an Eastern Church Father back in the late fourth, early fifth century, what he said was "if you go back to the Old Testament you see over and over again that it is God who rides on the clouds." So the cloud is a symbol of the fact that Jesus isn't just the Messiah, he's divine. It's a sign of his divinity. So, for example, in Psalm 104 it says "the Lord makes the cloud his chariot." The same thing in Isaiah 19:1, it says that "the LORD" — and that is all caps Lord, like the God of Israel, the God of the universe — "rides on a swift cloud." So in the Old Testament it is always God who comes on the cloud. The angels don't come on the clouds, the kings don't come on the clouds; God comes on the clouds. So when Jesus ascends into heaven on the cloud, the cloud there is a symbol of his divinity. So we don't want to get into too many questions about what kind of cloud is it? Is it a cirrus cloud or cumulus cloud? It is the glory cloud that the Lord would come down from heaven in in the Old Testament, and who is now going to go up to heaven in as a sign of his divinity. So this is yet another clue that Jesus is divine in all four Gospels, not just the Gospel of John, we have it here in Acts.

And then finally, what does it mean to say that Jesus ascended into heaven? Well if you look at the Bible carefully, you'll see heaven can have two different meanings here, and this is one of the reasons it confuses people. On the one hand,

the word heaven can just refer to the sky. In other words, the visible heavens, and in this sense Jesus does ascend into the sky because he goes up before the Apostles into heaven, taken up on this cloud. However, at the same time in the Old Testament and in the New, the word heaven can also be a word used to describe the invisible realm where God dwells. The Jews actually would refer to this as the third heaven or the heaven above the heavens. So you would have the visible sky, they saw this as the first heaven, then you have the the night sky where the stars are, they call that the second heaven, and then there's the third heaven, which is the invisible realm behind the stars, behind the cosmos, which is where God dwells. And so when the Apostles see Jesus ascending into heaven, it is not as if Jesus is going up through the stratosphere and then past the moon and past Pluto out to outer space somewhere, this is a visible manifestation in which he goes up in the sky and then disappears into the heavenly realm to go to be with his Father. That's what we mean when we say Jesus ascended into heaven, and you see that again in the Creed when it says not just that he ascended, but that "he is seated at the right hand of God the Father." He enters into the glory of God's heavenly throne room, the invisible divine realm where God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is. So that's the narrative of the Ascension in the book of Acts.

Again, if you have any questions about this you can see it confirmed if you look at the other readings for the day. So for today the Responsorial Psalm, a beautiful Psalm, Psalm 47, is all about the enthronement of God. There were certain Psalms in the Old Testament called enthronement Psalms. Most of them would celebrate the enthronement of the King of Israel, whether it be David or Solomon, but in this case it's an enthronement Psalm that is celebrating God's enthronement. It tells people to clap their hands and rejoice because the Lord is "King over all the earth" in verse 2. And then in verse 8 it says "God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne." So what does that mean? Well obviously it doesn't mean that God has a literal throne made out of stone up in the invisible heaven somewhere and that he sits down on it. The image of God sitting on his throne is a symbol for him reigning as king over all of his enemies, because when a king would stand up it would signify the fact that he was going out to battle. He's going to leave his throne and then go and do battle against his enemies. Once he's conquered his enemies, he goes and he mounts his throne, he ascends to his throne, and then he sits victorious as the king over all.

So the Church puts Psalm 47 before us for Jesus' Ascension because when Jesus goes in the heaven, he doesn't just leave this world, he goes into the divine realm and he takes his seat at the right hand of the Father; meaning that he sits victorious as king over the world and as king over the universe. So there's a real sense in which the feast of the Ascension is also celebrating, despite the fact that he was crucified, that Jesus Christ is the King of the universe. He might not look like a king on a cross, but in his resurrection and in his ascension he has now shown to us that he is the Lord of Lords, he is the King of Kings, and through his cross he conquered all of his enemies, so that he now is not only above all the kings of the earth, he's above all the angels. He's above Satan. He is above even the highest, holy Angels. All of them are under his feet even though he is now also fully man. So now he not only reigns as God, he reigns as man, King of the universe.

And again this is the thrust of the second reading for the feast today, which is from the letter to the Ephesians. For the sake of time I won't read it in any depth, but in Ephesians 1:17-23, and in verse 20 in particular, it says that:

[God] accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit 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 that which is 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 fulness of him who fills all in all.

So one of the things the Church is doing with this passage is making sure we remember that when we say Jesus Christ ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father, we are also saying not just that he was victorious over his enemies on earth, but that he is higher than all the angels. There are some different sects out there that have erroneous Christology, erroneous ideas about Jesus, and they will say things like Jesus is an angel or he's the highest of the Angels — for example, that's a doctrine of Jehovah's Witnesses. Well that is refuted by the mystery of the Ascension. Jesus is above all the angels because he reigns both as man, but also as God. He has placed every rule, authority, power and dominion — which is another names for Angels by the way — under his feet in his glorious ascension into heaven.

Alright so that gives you this beautiful litany of readings for this day, but it leads us back to the original question that we began with, which is this, why does the Church give us this text from Matthew 28 where Jesus says “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” on the day of the Ascension? Actually, I remember when I was a boy I used to pray a little book called the scriptural rosary, and it was a rosary book that had the mysteries of the rosary, but it had passages of Scripture that would go together with them. And one of those passages was from Matthew 28, and I always thought that was strange as a kid because Jesus says “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” and then he goes up into heaven on a cloud and the apostles are standing there looking up into heaven, almost as if they are wondering “is he coming back?” They are waiting for him to come back and the angels have to tell them “he will come back in the same way you have seen him go; now he has ascended into heaven.” Now their mission is to go out and preach the Gospel.

There's a sense in which that they weren't expecting that, they were puzzled by the mystery of his ascension. And it is a really good question. Why does Jesus say that he will be with us always and then leave? What is the reason for it? Well in this case, obviously Matthew's Gospel doesn't tell us, it doesn't answer the question. You have to draw on other passages in the New Testament and it is also helpful to draw on the tradition in this case. So as I was preparing for the video, one of the things I thought I would do here is just give you a quote from one of my favorite authors, St. Thomas Aquinas. So here is a copy of St. Thomas Aquinas' little book, the *Summa Theologica*. It is a short treatise, a short summary of theology. And in one of the volumes, volume 4, he actually takes up this whole issue. Why didn't Jesus stay on the earth after the resurrection? And this is a really important question. One reason I bring it up is because sometimes skeptics and critics will use this against Christianity, they will use it to argue against the resurrection. They will say “well it is real convenient for you to say that Jesus was raised from the dead. If Jesus was really raised from the dead then where is he? You say he's alive in his body, why can't I see him now? If he really was raised from the dead, why didn't he just stay with us?” So what they will say is that the Ascension is kind of a convenient doctrine for masking the fact that he wasn't really raised from the dead, because if he was then he should have stayed here. I will be honest with you; in my own life there was a time when I was really struggling with my faith in the resurrection and that was a question I had. If he

was raised from the dead, why didn't he stay? And St. Thomas, as always, anticipates these kind of objections and so he asked the question, "why didn't Jesus stay on earth? He poses it as a possible objection to the Ascension. And this is what St. Thomas says in the Summa Theologica, listen to this, he gives three reasons:

Christ's Ascension into heaven, whereby He withdrew his bodily presence from us, was more profitable for us that His bodily presence would have been. First of all, in order to increase our faith... "You shall see Me no longer"--For "blessed are they that see not, yet believe" (John 16:16; 20:20)

So in other words, what St. Thomas is saying is, Christ wanted us to have faith in things that were unseen because it's a greater faith. So to increase our faith he ascended into heaven where we cannot see him in his bodily presence so that we might receive the blessing of those who believe even though we don't see. The second reason, St. Thomas says:

... Secondly, to uplift our hope, "If I shall go, and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and take you to Myself, that where I am, there you also may be" (John 14:3). For by placing in heaven the human nature which He assumed, Christ gave us the hope of going thither...

Pause there, that is a really important point because the ascension is a bodily event. Jesus takes his human nature, his glorified body, up into the very life of the Trinity, into the realm of the divine, into the invisible realm of bliss that is heaven itself. Why? Because he wanted to show to us that that is our destiny, that is our hope. Our hope is not just to be revived or resuscitated in this world, this valley of tears, our hope is to be resurrected and then to be with Christ forever in our bodies in the glorious life of the Trinity, with the beatific vision of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So in order to show us our destiny and give us hope, Christ doesn't stay here. He goes back to his Father's house to prepare a place for us so that he can come and take us to be with him there forever. Thirdly, St. Thomas says:

Thirdly, in order to direct the fervor of our charity to heavenly things...
“Seek the things that are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1-2).²

In other words, God knows that it's easy for us to fall in love with earthly things, to fall in love with the things of this world and to think that we were made for this world, to try to find our happiness in finite things that are passing. And every time we try to do it what happens? We end up not happy because we are trying to seek infinite happiness from some finite thing, to seek an unending happiness in the passing things of this world. So in order to increase our love for heavenly things, Christ goes into heaven so that we can now fix our minds and our hearts on heaven, on the life of the Trinity. Because as Jesus said in the Gospels, "store up your treasure in heaven...where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." So he goes into heaven and then St. Thomas goes on to say — I didn't put this in the quotation — that “from heaven he then sends the Holy Spirit [this is the ultimate reason too] to dwell in our hearts so that our hearts might fall in love with Christ who is now seated in glory, so that our hope might be in that and that our faith might be in that.” In other words, why does Jesus ascend into heaven? To increase our faith, our hope and our love, and to rightly order those to our eternal destiny and to him. So it's a powerful, powerful explanation and an answer for the mystery of the Ascension. As we will see next week when we are looking at the mystery of Pentecost, the final reason is that Jesus says “if I don't go, then I can't send the spirit. But if I go, I am going to send the spirit and he is going to now dwell with you. I'm not going to leave you orphaned.” This is the reality of the fact that Jesus doesn't abandon us in the Ascension, because he is not only going to stay with us in the Eucharist, as we saw when we looked at the road to Emmaus, he is also going to be with us in a powerful way through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and we will be looking at that at Pentecost.

Finally, one last point. In order to prepare for Pentecost, I want to go back to that first verse. You'll notice that it said in Acts 1 that the ascension took place 40 days after Easter. Now as we are moving into the celebration of Pentecost, I want to point something out before we get there. Namely this, when we look at Pentecost, the word Pentecost is going to mean 50 — or 50th ethnically — so the 50th day

² Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, III, 57, 2

after Passover. So the question becomes what were the apostles doing between the Ascension on the 40th day and Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit, on the 50th day? Well if you look at Acts 1:12 and 14 it tells us that “they returned from Jerusalem to the mount called Olives” and it says “all these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.” So what happened in the nine days between the Ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit? The Apostles devoted themselves to nine days of prayer, day 41 all the way through the day 49, and then on the 50th day the Holy Spirit descends. I bring this up because this is the biblical route, or the biblical foundation, for the custom of praying a novena — especially the very venerable novena to the Holy Spirit in preparation for the feast of Pentecost. Sometimes people will ask, “where does this idea of praying for nine days come from? It sounds kind of superstitious that if you pray for nine days there will be this special outpouring of grace.” Well it is actually not superstitious, it's imitation of the apostles. It is biblical. It is modeling ourselves on the apostles, who after the Ascension go back to Jerusalem, spend nine days in intense prayer, and on the 10th day, after they finish those nine days of prayer, they receive the great grace of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But to look at that, we will have to wait for next Sunday's readings and next Sunday's celebration.