

The Ascension of the Lord (Year C)

<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>	Luke 24:46-53

Every year during the Season of Easter, the Church celebrates the great solemnity of Jesus' ascension into Heaven. And, although for many of us, when we think about Easter, when we think about the liturgical year, we put a lot of focus on the Passion of Jesus, on his death (on Good Friday), as well as the Resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday, it's really important to remember that in Christian theology, the Paschal Mystery doesn't just focus on Jesus' death and resurrection; it also culminates and climaxes in the great mystery of his ascension into Heaven forty days after Easter, forty days after The Resurrection. So every year the Church celebrates this mystery, the mystery of Jesus' Ascension into Heaven as a great solemnity, as a solemn day. Traditionally this was celebrated forty days after Easter, but in many dioceses throughout the United States, the feast (the solemnity) gets moved to Sunday. So we'll be celebrating it on a Sunday. So that's why we're doing a video today on the Solemnity of the Ascension for Year C (which of course is the year dedicated to the Gospel of Luke). So today's gospel is going to be taken from the Gospel of Luke and it's going to be Luke's account of the Ascension. We're going to read that and then we'll go back and unpack it and try to get at why this mystery matters so much. What is its meaning, and more importantly, just the basic question: why does Jesus ascend into Heaven? Why doesn't he just stay with us after the resurrection from the dead? So with those thoughts in mind, let's turn to Luke 24:46 and following, which reads this:

And said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of

sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are 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 blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.¹

Alright, end of the gospel. So the first thing you might notice about this gospel for today is a couple of things. First, this is one of two accounts of Jesus' ascension into Heaven that are given to us by St. Luke. So you might have noticed that in the gospel reading for today, it doesn't say anything about forty days passing between the Resurrection and Jesus ascending into Heaven. For that chronology you have to actually look at the second account of Jesus' Ascension, which is in the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, Acts 1:1-11, which will be the 1st reading for today. So just keep that in mind. Luke has these two distinct accounts. But because we read the gospel for the gospel reading, the Church gives us the end of Luke's gospel here as the proclamation for today.

The context of this particular reading is also important. It's Jesus speaking to the Apostles after his bodily resurrection from the dead. If you recall, in other accounts of the Resurrection, when the risen Jesus comes to the Apostles, they're bewildered, they're doubtful, they don't understand what's happened, they think he's a ghost. There's lots of confusion and lots of doubt. So in this particular passage for today's reading we see Christ explaining the meaning of the Resurrection to the disciples by going back to the scriptures, by pointing out to them that a major motive for credibility, for believing and for understanding in his bodily resurrection, is that it was prophesied in the Jewish scriptures, it was prophesied in the Old Testament. And specifically, what it says here, Jesus says that "it was written" (meaning the scriptures), "that the Messiah would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance would be preached in his name to all the nations". So notice those three elements. First, the idea of a suffering and dying Messiah. The key passage that's probably being alluded to here (well, there are several) would be the

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.

suffering servant in Isaiah 52 and 53, and then also the mysterious account of the death of the Messiah in Daniel 9. Second, that the Messiah would rise again on the third day, as I've explored in my book, *The Case for Jesus* (but also elsewhere). You can see this idea of death and resurrection on the third day in the book of the prophet Jonah, in Jonah 2, where the great prophet Jonah is swallowed by a fish, he dies, he goes down to Sheol, he descends to the realm of the dead, and then he rises again on the third day and then, third, goes and preaches repentance to the pagans of Nineveh (the city of Nineveh). If you want more on that, check out my book *The Case for Jesus*. The final chapters there are about the "sign of Jonah" as the death, resurrection and "proclamation to the nations" by a prophet.

Well, Jesus is the new and greater Jonah, so he's going to die, on the third day rise from the dead, and then, this is very important, repentance and forgiveness of sins is going to be preached (as Luke says here) to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. So it's very important for us to recognize here that the Resurrection from the dead (in Jesus' teaching to the disciples here) isn't just about his vindication. It's not just a message of "Hey, the Resurrection proves that Jesus was who he said that he was. It vindicates his identity as the Messiah. It vindicates his message about the kingdom of God." It does all those things, but it does something else, it inaugurates what the prophets had said over and over again (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah), that one day, the nations of the world, the non-Jewish peoples of the world, the non-Israelite peoples of the world (the pagans) would convert, would repent, and would begin to worship the one God of Israel. That's what Jesus is telling the disciples about. That's what he's saying has now come after the Resurrection. That repentance and forgiveness of sins is going to be preached in his name to all nations starting with Jerusalem. So in this case, we see that the disciples (Jesus says) are going to be the witnesses to these things. And the Greek word there is *martyres* (witnesses), "You will be the martyrs." Now in English we use that word to refer to someone who gives their life for the faith, who gives their life bearing witness to Christ. — which is something that happened just recently, we had a massacre of 300 Catholics in Sri Lanka, who bore witness to Christ, who put their lives on the line simply by going to mass to celebrate the Resurrection and were massacred in three different churches. They are *martyres*, they are witnesses to the Good News of the Death and Resurrection of Christ. They are witnesses to the gospel.

However, in its original context, the primary emphasis of "witness" is somebody who bears testimony, like oral testimony, even onto death (to be sure); but what Je-

Jesus is saying to the Apostles here is “You’re going to go out and you’re going to proclaim the truth of the Resurrection.” And of course, most of the Apostles will in fact be put to death and become martyrs in the fullest sense of the word, bearing witness even unto death. But at this point that meaning is only implicit, it’s not going to be explicit at this point just yet. Right now what Jesus is talking about is the mission of evangelization, bringing the Good News of his Passion, Death, Resurrection and the forgiveness of sins to all the peoples of the world, starting with Jerusalem. However, Jesus (in this passage) also knows that the Apostles aren’t ready to do that yet. They’re still fearful. They’re still confused. They’re not empowered yet by the Holy Spirit to carry out that mission, and so he tells them, “Stay in the city until you’re clothed with power from on high”. In other words, he’s pointing ahead there to the mystery of Pentecost, which we’ll be coming to celebrate very soon in the liturgical year.

Before I move on any further though, I just want to press pause here for a second and just highlight the fact that in this passage, from Luke’s gospel, we have a very nice summary of what evangelization in the early Church looks like. We hear a lot of talk in our day and time (the 21st Century in particular) about the new evangelization. This new movement of the Church, first coined by Pope St. John Paul II, of bringing the gospel to the nations in a new way; a new stage of evangelization. So it’s always helpful, if we want to understand what the new evangelization looks like, to go back to the first evangelization, what the old evangelization looked like in the gospels. And I can’t help but be struck here by the fact that when Jesus talks about “bringing the gospel”, “bearing witness to the Good News of his Resurrection, his Passion and Death”, you’ll notice what he describes here. Notice what he says, that repentance (number 1) and forgiveness of sins (number 2) should be preached in his name.

Now why do I bring that up? Well I bring that up because it’s easy in our modern day to forget that repentance from sin is an essential part of the gospel. See, the gospel’s not just “Jesus died and rose again”. That’s important, it’s absolutely fundamental, but also, what is your response to that event? What is your response to the Death and the Resurrection of the Christ? And here, what Jesus is giving the Apostles is the message of repentance. The Greek word here is *metanoia* and it literally means “to change your mind”. Specifically, to change your mind about sin and about what your life should look like, and how you should live your life. So, repentance isn’t like an optional thing. I recently heard someone on the internet say “well nowadays you can’t preach about sin and judgment. You just have to woo

people to the beauty of the gospel. You just have to talk about the beauty of the gospel.” Well, there’s a certain truth to that, that we need to show people the truth and goodness and beauty of the gospel. But one of the good things about the gospel is that you can turn away from sin, you can change your life through God’s grace, and through repentance, you can be forgiven of your sins. So, there is no evangelization (basically what I’m saying here), according to Jesus, there is no evangelization without a message of repentance from sin. So to the extent that we leave out the reality of sin in preaching the Good News and we leave out the call to repentance, we actually don’t engage in evangelization (according to Jesus), certainly not according to the apostolic model of evangelization, which doesn’t just include repentance, but begins with repentance and (always coupled with) the forgiveness of sins that comes through the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

A third element of evangelization that we see here in Luke’s gospel today is that it’s universal. So Jesus is revealing to the disciples that they’re now called to go not just to the towns of Israel, but to all the nations, Jerusalem and the nations, to the Jew first and to the Greek is how Paul will put it later in his Letter to the Romans 1. So there’s this universal dimension to evangelization, and then finally (of course, as I’ve already mentioned) the call to martyrdom. “You (you apostles) will be the witnesses” (the *martyres*) of all of these things: The Passion, Death, Resurrection of Christ, and the forgiveness of sins that’s preached in his name.

Now, with that summary of what the gospel looks like and what evangelization looks like, we then move in to (really) what is the heart of today’s gospel, which is the actual account of the Ascension itself. And what’s interesting here is you’ll notice that Jesus leads them out of the city and he does something interesting. He lifts up his hands, he blesses them, and while his hands are raised in a blessing, he departs from them and is carried up into Heaven. Now, why is that important? Well, as a number of scholars have pointed out, this gesture of lifting up his hands in blessing isn’t just a kind of “farewell” to the disciples, but it’s a priestly action. If you were a 1st Century Jew — like all of the Apostles were — and Jesus lifted up his hands to bless you, you would recognize, implicit in that action, his identity as, not just any priest, but as high priest. You can see this if you go back to the book of Leviticus 9:22. It’s describing the famous high priestly blessing of Aaron, the brother of Moses, the first high priest of the Mosaic covenant. And it says in verse 22 of chapter 9 in Leviticus:

Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings.

So, what happens here is Aaron has offered sacrifice, then he comes down from the altar, lifts up his hands and blesses the people. So there's both similarity and dissimilarity between Jesus and Aaron here. Jesus, like Aaron, has just offered the sacrifice of himself on the cross, and he raises his hands to bless the Apostles. And think here of the Apostles as representatives of the tribes of Israel. But instead of coming down from an altar, what does Jesus do? He goes up into Heaven, he goes up into the heavenly sanctuary, up into the heavenly temple. And a number of scholars have recognized (actually going back to ancient times), that Luke here is deliberately emphasizing Jesus' identity as priest. So he's not just a prophet, he's not just the king of Israel, Jesus is also the Messianic priest, the Messianic high priest. You can actually see this if you look at Luke's gospel as a whole, because if you recall, how did Luke's gospel begin? It began with the priest, Zechariah, going into the Temple to offer the incense and then coming out of the temple, and what were the people waiting for him to do? They were waiting for him to give them his priestly blessing. But he can't do it because he's mute after doubting Gabriel's message to him about the birth of John the Baptist. So by contrast, then the gospel ends with Jesus (the true high priest), not mute at all, but blessing the Apostles and then telling them to go out and bear witness to the good news of his Passion, Death and Resurrection. So it's kind of like an *inclusio* (scholars call it this way), beginning and ending with a similar theme to reveal Jesus' identity as high priest. And it's fascinating, if you go back to ancient Christian writers like St. Augustine and others, commentators on the gospel of Luke (St. Ambrose of Milan), they all say that Luke's gospel is the gospel of Jesus' priesthood. It's the one that reveals Jesus in the clearest way to be the true priest, the high priest of the new and everlasting covenant. We will come back to that at the end of the lecture, because Jesus' identity as priest and his ascension into heaven go hand-in-hand with one another. The priesthood of Jesus supplies an answer to the question, "why doesn't Jesus just stay on Earth?" I mean, he's resurrected. Who's a better evangelist than Jesus? Why does he send these knuckleheads out to evangelize the world? Why does he leave if he's really risen from the dead?

But before we get there, let's go back to the 1st reading for today. Throughout the Easter season we have seen that the 1st reading is always taken from the Acts of the Apostles rather than the Old Testament. We're living in the age of the Church now

and the Church is calling us to focus on the mission of the Church, which is given to us in the very unique and extremely important book, the Acts of the Apostles. So in Acts 1, the reading for today is the 2nd account of the ascension of Jesus into Heaven, from the first 11 verses of Luke's, so-to-speak, part 2 of his 2-part work. His two volume work, Luke-Acts. So it says this:

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."

Alright, so there are several elements of this account that are important to highlight. The first one is that Luke makes very explicit here (in a way that he doesn't in the gospel) about exactly when Jesus ascends into Heaven, when his definitive ascension takes place. And it's forty days after The Resurrection. Now, if you're a 1st Century Jew, and you're familiar with the Old Testament, you would know that forty (the number forty) has a very special meaning, a very special symbolism. Forty days (or the number forty in general) always symbolizes a time of transition, a time of purification and a time of preparation for a new stage. You can see this in the forty days and forty nights of the flood in Genesis 7. What's the forty days and the forty nights doing? It's cleansing, it's purifying the world of sin, and transition-

ing to a time of new creation, where God's going to make the world new again. The exodus from Egypt in Exodus 34 is forty years long. Why? Well because Israel's being purified of her sins that she had during the time in Egypt when she committed idolatry. She's also transitioning from Egypt to the Promised Land, and she's preparing to enter into the inheritance that God gives her. And then finally too, there are other passages as well, like Moses spends forty days and forty nights on Mt. Sinai; purifying himself, preparing himself, to enter into the presence of God and receive the commandments of God that he's going to go and bring down to the people of Israel. So forty is always a kind of symbolic number that calls to mind all of those things: purification, preparation, transition. I was thinking of one other, Jesus' forty days and forty nights in the desert; same thing. He is doing penance for the sins of humanity. He's preparing for his public ministry. He's transitioning into that phase.

So the same thing is true of the forty days and forty nights of the Apostles between the Resurrection and the Ascension. It's a time when Jesus continues to purify their understanding of the kingdom that he's come to proclaim (which they still seem to think of in earthly terms here). He's also transitioning them from the time of his public ministry, when he was with them in his ordinary human body, to a time when he's not going to be with them in his ordinary body, but rather it will be the spirit of God that is with them and that sends them out to bear witness. And he's also preparing them for the Feast of Pentecost, for what's going to happen to them on Pentecost, when the new evangelization will begin, the spreading of the Good News to the nations. So all that's taking place in the Ascension. That's one reason why (for centuries) the Church always celebrated the Ascension on the fortieth day after the Resurrection. Ascension Thursday is the traditional day because time matters, because there's a sacred quality to that number of forty days and forty nights, and that's why the solemnity is traditionally anchored on that day.

So, with that said, Jesus in Acts 1 is brought up in Heaven on a cloud; he's taken up into Heaven. And again, this is one of those things that in a 1st Century Jewish context (if you know the scriptures and you know the Old Testament), what does going to Heaven on a cloud mean? Well it's a revelation of Jesus' divinity, of his divine identity. You'll see this because in the Old Testament, it's God who comes on the clouds. Whenever there's smoke (like a pillar of smoke) or a cloud, that's almost always associated with a theophany, which is just a technical term for "an appearance of God". "God comes with the clouds", as in Isaiah 19 or throughout the Psalms. Daniel 7, the revelation of the Ancient of Days, the Son of Man, he's

like a son of man, he looks human, but he's clearly a divine being in some sense, because he goes rides on the clouds to be presented to the Ancient of Days. So that's what's being revealed here: Jesus' divinity through this ascension into Heaven in a cloud.

Some people may get confused by that language, "ascension into Heaven", what does that mean? Does that mean that Jesus goes up into the stratosphere? Does he keep going past Pluto somewhere? What does that mean? Well it's crucial to recognize that in Judaism and in the scriptures, the word "heaven" can have a number of different meanings. One basic meaning for heaven is the sky ("the heavens"). And there's a real sense in which that's what Luke is describing here, that the Apostles see Jesus caught up visibly into the sky. However, Heaven also means the invisible realm in which God dwells. So the visible heaven is the sky, but it is a kind of sacrament, a kind of visible, earthly symbol for the invisible realm in which the Lord dwells: "The heavens", the "heaven of heavens". You'll see Paul talk about this as the "third heaven" in 2 Corinthians, for example. So what Jesus is doing here is, through this physical manifestation of being caught up in a cloud into the sky, revealing that he is now entering into the invisible realm where the Father dwells, and from which he will send the spirit to the Apostles. That's what this day is celebrating.

That's why the Responsorial Psalm for today, Psalm 47, is all about the enthronement of God. The Lord is king over all the earth. God has gone up and he sits on his holy throne. Why are we singing that? Well, because what's happening here is through the revelation of Jesus' divinity, the Ascension not only manifests to us that he's not just the king of Israel, he's the divine son; it also tells us where he will reign from. The Apostles are still thinking earthly terms, earthly kingdom. Maybe they're waiting for him to go into Jerusalem and setup a new golden throne of David and go and sit on the throne in the earthly temple in Jerusalem, or in an earthly palace in Jerusalem. What the Ascension tells us is that no, in its essence, the kingdom that Jesus has come to inaugurate is a heavenly kingdom, and as heavenly king of the heavenly kingdom, Jesus is going to go to sit upon his throne, not on earth but in Heaven. So we read one of these ancient enthronement psalms to sing and to celebrate what the day of the Ascension is about. Namely, the enthronement of Christ as king of the universe. That's what we're celebrating, the kingship of Christ over all the nations, over the whole world, Because his throne is Heaven.

Alright, now, with all that said, I want to bring our discussion to a close by just returning to one key theme: namely, not just the royal dimension of the Ascension, but his priestly identity. Now, in this case there's a 2nd reading for today. I don't always focus on the 2nd readings because they're kind of on their own individual track, but for today I'd at least like to highlight the fact that the second option for the 2nd reading is from the book of Hebrews 9 & 10. The letter to the Hebrews here is the most extended reflection on the mystery of Jesus' Ascension in the New Testament. And in the reading for today it talks about the fact that Christ has entered into a sanctuary not made with hands, and he is "the great priest over the house of God". The 2nd reading details that entry into the heavenly sanctuary. Now the reason that matters for today (the Feast of the Ascension) is because in the Ascension into Heaven, Jesus doesn't just return to the Father and he doesn't just ascend to his royal throne. According to Hebrews, on the day of the Ascension, Jesus also enters into the heavenly Temple (the heavenly sanctuary not made with hands) in order to offer the sacrifice of himself to the Father for all eternity, once and for all time.

Why does that matter? Well, it matters because apart from that you can't understand how the Ascension is the climax of the Paschal mystery. Many of us, when we think of Jesus offering sacrifice, we think just of Calvary, where he pours out his blood and his life on the cross. And to be sure, that is the supreme sacrifice. And we might also think of the Last Supper, in which he pours out his body and blood under the appearance of bread and wine. And that too is an essential part of the Paschal mystery. But what we tend to forget is that that earthly sacrifice that Jesus starts in the upper room and brings to a climax on Calvary, doesn't stop with Calvary. But that in his resurrection from the dead and then his ascension into Heaven, Jesus takes his body, which is now crucified and risen (but still has the wounds), and he brings that human nature, that human body, that glorified body, into the heavenly sanctuary where he offers himself as a sacrifice to the Father, not in time, but in eternity; not on earth, but in Heaven. And in this sense it's fascinating. On earth he fulfills the feast of Passover and the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, but in the Ascension Jesus fulfills the Day of Atonement, when the high priest would enter once a year into the Holy of Holies to offer a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people of Israel, for the sins of that year. He would do it every year. Here, Jesus enters into the heavenly sanctuary not year after year after year after year, but once and for all time. So the Ascension is an essential (no pun intended) part of the Paschal mystery, because it takes the historical event of the Passion and brings it into eternity. And you don't have to take my word for that, you can actual-

ly listen to the Catechism. So in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 662, there's a beautiful meditation on the Ascension. I'll close with these words. This is what it says:

The lifting up of Jesus on the cross signifies and announces his lifting up by his Ascension into heaven, and indeed begins it. Jesus Christ, the one priest of the new and eternal Covenant, "entered, not into a sanctuary made by human hands. . . but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf."

That's a quote from Hebrews, for today

There [meaning in heaven] Christ permanently exercises his priesthood, for he "always lives to make intercession" for "those who draw near to God through him". As "high priest of the good things to come" he is the center and the principal actor of the liturgy that honors the Father in heaven.

What does that mean? Let me put it this way: For years I always used to wonder, how does the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary (that happened 2,000 years ago), how is that made present to me today through the sacrifice of the Eucharist (through the mass)? How does the body and blood of Jesus that was poured out in the upper room and then poured out on Calvary, how does it transfer (so-to-speak), how does it come through time to me, now, in the 21st Century? And the answer's real simple. It's the Ascension, because in the Ascension, Christ takes that historical sacrifice that happened 2,000 years ago and he brings it into eternity, where it's no longer bound by space, and it's no longer bound by time. And that sacrifice, that one sacrifice, can now be made present on every altar throughout the world every time the Eucharist is offered. This is why it's crucial to understand the Ascension if you want to grasp how it is that when a priest offers the Sacrifice of the Mass, he's not re-sacrificing Jesus. Jesus isn't being sacrificed again. It's an earthly participation in the one sacrifice that now is in eternity through the mystery of the Ascension. And that's why every priest on earth who offers the sacrifice of the Eucharist is really participating in the one eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ, our high priest, in Heaven.