

Seventh Sunday of Easter – Ascension Sunday

First reading:

*The Ascension
(Acts 1.1-11)*

How are we to envisage what happened at the Ascension? Two feet disappearing into a cloud? It is mentioned only in the Acts, and the other gospels seem to imply that the Risen Christ was glorified on the day of the Resurrection itself. Luke, the author, is putting across several messages.

First, the 40 days since Easter should not be carefully counted. In biblical language, '40' makes just 'a fairly long period', often a period of preparation, like Jesus' 40 days being tested in the desert, or Israel's 40 years of the Exodus. For all that time Jesus has been preparing his apostles.

Second, it is the definitive parting of the physical Jesus, after which the Risen Christ is no longer with his disciples. It is now the Spirit of Christ that is at the heart of the Church, inspiring all its activity.

Third, Luke represents Jesus as a prophet (and more than a prophet), so he leaves his disciples in the same way as the prophet Elijah, who was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot, leaving his disciple Elisha to carry on his work, filled with a double share of his spirit.

Question:

In what way is the Ascension an encouragement? How would you explain the Ascension to a non-Christian friend?

Second reading:

*Christ is Supreme
(Ephesians 1.17-21)*

The blessing that forms the core of this reading gives the sense of the Ascension for the Church. It is not the manner of Christ's departure that is important, but the exalted position of Christ, and the power of God that raised Christ from the dead. This same power has called us to be believers, made us rich in the glory of his heritage, and has given us the strength to follow Christ.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus was divine not only from birth but from the moment of his conception. It was then that the Word of God became flesh. And yet something further happened at the glorification of Christ in his Resurrection. Paul says he was 'constituted Son of God in power' at the Resurrection. Is this the same as the claim that the high priest declared blasphemous, 'You will see the son of man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of heaven'?

In the final scene of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus declares, 'All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me', and the Book of Revelation shows the Risen Christ sharing the throne of God.

Question:

Are there evil spirits abroad in the world? How does evil accord with God's power?

In his two-volume history, Luke has two versions of the Ascension, one at the end of the gospel (today's gospel reading), one at the beginning of the second volume (our first reading today).

The emphasis of the first reading was on the open-endedness of the mission of the apostles: they were to wait till the Spirit came, after which they would continue their mission until the return of Christ - whenever that was going to be. It is a bracket opening a clause, which will be closed only at the end of the world.

The emphasis in the gospel reading is on the final blessing of Christ as he departs, and on the joy and thanksgiving that this imparts. There is a sense of completion, for the gospel began in the Temple with the annunciation to Zechariah, and it ends in the Temple with the disciples praising God. There is also a sense of beginning, as the Good News is to spread from Jerusalem to all nations. In either case, the challenge is there: Christ must now play his part through us, his followers. If we act in the Spirit, Christ is acting. If we do not, the Spirit is stifled.

Question:

Can you see any signs of Christ's presence in the world today?
