

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?

For Matthew, this is a momentous climax. Jesus is on the Holy Mountain. But where is this mountain? We do not know; but that does not matter. The importance is that Jesus is commissioning his followers as the Second Moses.

Just so, he taught the Sermon on the Mount on the Holy Mountain, as Moses had given the Old Law on Mount Sinai. He is the glorious Son of Man of the prophecy of Daniel, to whom all authority on earth was given; but to him is given all authority in heaven and on earth.

As Jesus sends them out, he promises that his divine presence will be always with them. It is in the strength of that presence that they will pursue their task. This promise provides the final bracket of the Gospel, as the name given to Jesus by the angel provided the opening bracket: 'They will call him "Emmanuel", a name which means "God is with us".'

The divine presence of God in Jesus and in his community is the clue to the whole Gospel of Matthew. In the centre of the Gospel, it is again stressed, 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.'

Question:

Why does Matthew present Jesus as the Second Moses? Does it mean anything to me?
