

# THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD 2020

*Reflection*

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**First Reading (Acts 1:1-11).** Luke has the Ascension happening on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and coming some forty days after the resurrection, as a solemn finale to his resurrection appearances. (The Ascension marks the termination of his earthly appearances). At the beginning of his second volume (Acts), he gives a brief recapitulation of the Gospel. Then he passes to a summary of the conversation of Jesus with the apostles after his resurrection. We then have a final appearance during which he promises to send them the Holy Spirit, a power that will enable them to be his witnesses. Through them the message of Jesus would reach out from Jerusalem in ever-widening circles. The passage concludes with a description of the Ascension.

**Second Reading (Eph 1:17-23).** Here Paul expresses the theological meaning of the Ascension: God has glorified Jesus, raising him above all earthly powers, and making him head of the Church and Lord of creation. However, Paul is more interested in the consequences of all this for Christians. He talks about the hope the Ascension holds out for us: we are destined to share in the glory of Jesus.

**Gospel (Mt 28: 16-20).** Matthew has the Ascension happening on a mountain in Galilee. But, as in the First Reading, Jesus gives a mission and a promise to his followers. Jesus solemnly declares that the Father has given him total power over the universe. He is, therefore, in a position to launch a universal mission. So he commissioned his representatives and sent them into the world to make 'disciples of all nations'. His own ministry was confined to Israel; now the good news is for all. One becomes a disciple through baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – undoubtedly the formula that was in use in the baptismal liturgy of Matthew's church. The apostles are to teach all the commands they received from the Lord. Matthew rounds off his Gospel with a word of encouragement for the disciples - the promise of the Lord to be with them always. The Ascension does not represent his removal from the earth, it represents his liberation from all restrictions of time and space, so that he can be present everywhere on earth.

## **Reflection:**

The Lord's Ascension is still a holy day of obligation in many countries in the world. The Ascension is affirmed in all the creeds of the Church, "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." The mystery of the Lord's Ascension is in all the creeds because it proclaims some powerful truths.

**Firstly,** the Ascension is about Jesus returning into the Father's glory and what that means for the human race. Jesus's Ascension reminds us that now he cannot be captured by any one country. He is Lord of all nations. He is no longer bound to any one language. He can be reached in any language. He is not owned by any one culture. He can be part of all cultures. As the Letter to the Ephesians says, "He fills the universe in all its parts." The Ascension means that Jesus is the universal Lord. Every part of this world comes within his redeeming, healing embrace.

**Secondly**, the Ascension is not just about Jesus' absence but about a different kind of presence. Jesus leaves in a dramatic way enveloped by the cloud to emphasize that from now on he will be with us in a new kind of way, not visually but in his spiritual, sacramental presence. Our experience of Christ is not like that of the disciples who saw him, touched him and ate with him. Our experience of the Risen Lord is like that of billions since then who have not seen with their eyes but have real contact with Christ through faith, the sacraments, prayer and the life of the Church. That is why Jesus gives the great commission to spread the Gospel. People will now encounter Jesus through the life of the Church. He is with us with the same redeeming power and cleansing love as he was with the Apostles but in a different way.

**Finally**, the Ascension is not only about Jesus but also about us. Where Jesus is now, we hope to be one day. "I am going to prepare a place for you," says the Lord. Although the life journey for each of us is different, our destination is the same, union with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For some people that journey may be short or long. It may have much suffering and challenge. It may be difficult and demanding. We should be united by knowing that we are all striving to arrive at the same destination. Our life here on earth does not fully define who we are. It is not a complete picture. It is not the whole truth. We have an immense glory ahead of us to be where Jesus is. Heaven is not some alien place but our true home, the place for which we strive and yearn in so many subtle ways. St. Thomas Aquinas calls it our "patria," our true homeland. Where Jesus is now, we hope to be one day.

The Ascension, this neglected mystery, teaches us some powerful truths in whose light we should live: Jesus is the universal Christ, Redeemer of the whole world; we have a future large and more enduring than this world. We will last longer than the mountains, the sun and the stars; in Christ, we will share the very life and eternity of God. Because Jesus returned to the Father and sent the Holy Spirit, he is more than an example. He is now close to every one of us. That is why after the Ascension, the Apostles returned to the Temple praising God and that is why we celebrate this feast today. The Ascension is not about absence but about the new, spiritual presence of Christ to all of us, wherever we are, through the Holy Spirit. Now, the Risen Lord Jesus is as close to us as the beating our heart. The Ascension means that Jesus is gone from our sight but not from our life. The Ascension of Jesus is a mystery that is beyond words. Nevertheless, it stands for something real that happened to Jesus. For Jesus his ascension was not a journey into outer space, but a journey home. He was returning to the Father to be glorified. The ascension means that the humble Jesus who suffered and died, now reigns in glory at the right hand of the Father. God has raised him above all earthly powers and made him head of the Church and Lord of creation (Second Reading). The Ascension doesn't mean that Jesus was abandoning his Apostles and that he would no longer be present on earth. The glorified Jesus had no intention of abandoning his Apostles. Indeed, he promised to remain with them to the end of time. The Ascension does not represent his removal from the earth. It is his liberation from all restrictions of time and space. During his earthly ministry he could only be in one place at a time. But now that he is united with God, he is present wherever God is present; and that is everywhere.

The Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus are central teachings of Christianity. Jesus' passion and death would not have been enough to bring salvation. Evil would have conquered if it had not been for the resurrection. The Gospel ends as Jesus commissions the Eleven to go out and make disciples of all nations. We are part of that mission, called to share Christ's message and to lead people to be baptized

in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We live our Christian life with the final words of Matthew's Gospel as words of great encouragement: "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, is Emmanuel, God with us until the end of time. In the celebration of the Lord's Ascension we rejoice greatly for the assurance that future glory is realized in Jesus Christ and offered to the human race. This gift encourages us to desire deeply and always the glory of heaven. We wish to go to heaven where Christ has gone. Where Christ has gone we hope to follow. Where Jesus is now, we hope to be one day. "I am going to prepare a place for you," says the Lord. Each liturgical action is meant to lift us up further in joy and wonder for everything that God has accomplished on our behalf in Jesus Christ.

This weekend we celebrate the Lord's Ascension, as the start of a special time of waiting. Jesus told his Apostles to wait in Jerusalem for the great gift they would need for their future work of sharing the Gospel. Like the Apostles and our Blessed Lady waiting for Pentecost, we are waiting for the Holy Spirit. Our prayer in this special time is more a quiet listening than asking for what we want. This prayer of waiting needs a quiet heart, and silence expresses it better than words. Waiting for others can be full of loving anticipation. The Lord's Ascension invites us to enter into that prayerful waiting as we prepare for Pentecost next Sunday. Amen.

***I would like to wish all of you and your family have a good and peaceful week!***

***I keep all of you in my prayers. May Almighty God bless and be with you always.***

***Fr Tao Pham***