

# the Sunday Readings



**As they were looking on, Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him from their sight. (Acts 1 : 9)**

## **Ascension of the Christ (a)** **Ascension of the Christ (a)**

## ***Go to the whole world***<sup>1</sup>

### Life in the spirit/Spirit<sup>2</sup> of Jesus – part 7

#### **introduction**

The physical absence of Jesus shifts responsibility to his followers. From now on they will continue his work of proclaiming, 'the realm of GOD'. The last five verses of Matthew conclude the message of the gospel in a simple but summary way. The scene is set in Galilee, where most of Jesus' preaching took place. The location draws our attention to an identity between the historical Jesus and the Risen Christ.

This Sunday opens *a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*. In the course of history, there have been many renewal movements in the Church which is always in need of deeper conversion to her head, Jesus Christ. Sometimes these movements have led to divisions, contradicting what Jesus asks the Father, *"that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me"*.<sup>3</sup> We confess our sins and pray for forgiveness and healing of our divisions through our appeal to the spirit/Spirit of Jesus.

**first reading: Acts 1:1 – 11**<sup>4</sup>

[ a summary and significance of Jesus' life ]

*In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning(1) until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.(2) After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of GOD.(3) While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me;(4) for John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."(5) So when they had come together, they asked him, "LORD, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"(6) He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.(7) But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth."(8) When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.(9)*

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<sup>1</sup>Cover Image: painting of the Ascension of Christ – by Benevenuto Tisi (1550).

<sup>2</sup>*Life in the 'spirit/Spirit of Jesus'*: To indicate the harmony between the *Spirit of GOD* and the human spirit informed by GOD, we use the expression '*spirit/Spirit*'. This expression describes the empowering that results from Jesus' apprenticing his disciples. He *informs* disciples with his '*spirit/Spirit*' or '*grace*' – as he is empowered by the Father's Spirit. Jesus' disciples assimilated his '*spirit/Spirit*' and go on to accomplish in their practise (cf. Book of Acts) the empowering for life-giving, which Jesus showed in his practise.

<sup>3</sup>Jn.17:23

<sup>4</sup>The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

*While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. (10) They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."(11)*

The Christian church began with the community formed by Jesus with his disciples. But in the present, the community lives with the absence of the historical Jesus. Jesus' former mode of presence has ended. A community of disciples must recognise Jesus' presence in a new way and assume responsibility to continue the risen Jesus' mission (v.8). In Luke's theology, the ascending of Jesus (v.9) serves to explain the community's life and mission.

The forty days, during which the risen Christ instructed his disciples (v.3) evokes the formative forty years the Israelites sojourned in the desert and Jesus' forty days of testing. Jesus had told his disciples not to leave Jerusalem, but to await there the Father's promised Spirit (v.4a). Jesus had cautioned disciples against any preoccupation with the exact timing of the restoration of GOD's reigning (v.7). The geography for the disciples' mission is mapped out (v.8) and there follows a symbolic statement of Jesus' going away (vv.9-10). Thus Luke states the ending of Jesus' missionary work wasn't his death – but his departure from history as a living person.

The prospect of Jesus' return (v.11) introduces a healthy tension into the community's life, as the disciples move towards completing GOD's new reigning. For Luke, the Ascension marks the end of the appearances of Jesus except for the extraordinary appearance to Paul. With regard to Luke's understanding of salvation history, the Ascension also marks the end of the time of Jesus and signals the beginning of the time of the church.

**response: Psalm 47 : 1 – 9**

[ God's rule over the nations ]

*Make a joyful noise to GOD, all the Earth;(1)  
sing the glory of His name;  
give to Him glorious praise.(2)  
Say to GOD, "How awesome are Your deeds!  
Because of Your great power,  
Your enemies cringe before You.(3)  
All the Earth worships You; they sing praises to You,  
sing praises to Your name." (4)  
Come and see what GOD has done:  
He is awesome in His deeds among mortals.(5)  
He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot.  
There we rejoiced in him,(6) Who rules by His might forever,  
Whose eyes keep watch on the nations -  
let the rebellious not exalt themselves. (7) . . .  
Come and hear, all you who fear GOD,  
and I will tell what He has done for me.(16) . . .  
Blessed be GOD, because He has not rejected my prayer  
or removed His steadfast love from me.(20)*

The Christian community had no language of its own through which it could express what was inexpressible. For that reason, it relied upon its ancient tradition of praise – the Israelite psalms. The Exodus event comes immediately to the speaker's mind and mouth (v.6). A community that has complained and then experienced rescue, now gives thanks publicly for the transformation.

The Israelites' most fundamental memory is of their liberation by the LORD GOD (vv.5-6) and the speaker affirms their liberation from *'the gods'* of other nations. If other nations concede this, they concede the delegitimation of their own gods. It is a triumph of the power of liberation over the power of control. The speaker has no interest in how the community got into trouble.

The accent is on the release and restoration which is worked by GOD (v.7). No amount of imperial control can finally deter this GOD. The song functions to affirm the new ordering. It is well-being that permits life. It derives from GOD's power and action. Israelite life is not now at the mercy of other hostile powers. GOD's secure place of well-being over-rides any threats. As the community experiences this, people take it as their personal assurance for trustful living.

**second reading: Ephesians 1 : 17 – 23**

[ thanksgiving and

prayer ]

*I pray that the GOD of our LORD Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, (17) so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints,(18) and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.(19) GOD put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,(20) 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 the age to come.(21) And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church,(22) which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.(23)*

The brief reference to the ascending of Jesus in the following reading functions as part of the author's general theme of praise about GOD's actions in Christ, on behalf of humankind. The ascending of Jesus signals the empowerment of the Christian community. Its life is linked to the 'heavenly Christ' whom GOD has made ruler of all things and head of the community (vv.22-23). The author prays that *'the Father of glory'* will grant the Ephesian Christians a clear knowledge of GOD's reigning through the risen Jesus (vv.17-21).

The author wants GOD to enlighten the Christian disciples at Ephesus with the hope that is their birthright. Only then, will they be able to appreciate the sanctifying grace this hope inspires. The power derived from this hope is compared to the powerful raising by GOD of Jesus to glory (vv.19b-21). It is an appropriate comparison to make because the object of a disciple's hope is in Christ's new life. The divine power is reflected in faithful disciples as a pledge of their future

inheritance. Christ has already received hope's promise in full. As Christ's body, the Christian community is sure of the hope that is made real in the One who, *'has ascended'* to head their community.

**Gospel reading: Matthew 28 : 16 – 20**

[ the commissioning of the disciples ]

*... And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.(16) This is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. You know Him, because He abides with you, and He will be in you.(17) "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.(18) In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.(19) On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."(20)*

Women responding to the angel's instruction, bring news to the male disciples of the empty tomb and the message that Jesus has risen and to be found in Galilee. Jesus appears to the women and gives them the same message as the angel, *"Go and tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; they will see me there"*.<sup>5</sup> Jesus is also here (in Auckland). The disciples could have been tempted to put Jesus resurrected 'in heaven' – that is – in *'the great blue beyond'* so the Earth could go right on – without any change; continuing injustices, despair, hopelessness and poverty. But the gospel affirms Jesus rose to be, *'here on Earth'*. *"He has risen from the dead and now he is going before you to Galilee"*.<sup>6</sup>

At the pre-arranged meeting place on the mountain, Jesus came up and spoke to the disciples. He invites them into partnership in his own mission (vv.18-19). GOD had given Jesus, *"all authority in heaven and Earth"* (v.18b). Just as Jesus has been sent into the world with authority – the women are sent; now their brother disciples are sent: *'to go and tell the good news'* by baptising into the name of the Trinity (v.19).

This mission contradicts the prophets of doom, who lament that our world is past mending. The gospel affirms that Jesus came to mend the world (v.20). The disciples extend the task of mending. The politics of the Bible is: *'a communion'* of all, with everything held in common, living in all our relationships, a partnership animated by the absolute equality of love that exists between Jesus and his Father. For this we need a new birthing. St.Paul exhorts us to throw off the old ways and clothe ourselves in the new.<sup>7</sup> According to Paul, there is to be no distinction between Israelite and non-Israelite; master and slave; male and female.<sup>8</sup> Where there is this *'spirit'* – that's heaven! Where there's no division, selfishness or deceit – that's eternal life! The GOD that Jesus presents isn't *up-there-in-heaven* but is in a

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<sup>5</sup>Mt.28:10

<sup>6</sup>Mt.28:7

<sup>7</sup>Rm.13:14 & Col.3:10

<sup>8</sup>Ga.3:28

creative, liberating, and supporting partnership with people (v.20). If we want to find the Trinitarian GOD, that's where we have to look – in the creative, liberating and helping practise of people. Moses reminded the ancient Israelites that the invisible GOD was heard in the speech of command.<sup>9</sup> For us modern Christian disciples, the same link existing between hearing GOD's commandments and acting on them holds true. The presence of the living GOD is found in this expression of the command to love.

Those who believe in Jesus are the ones who practise justice and love. Baptism, *"in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit"*, can also mean baptism into the name of the Trinity. That means incorporation into partnership with the creative, liberative and advocacy work of the Trinity on Earth. The whole human race becomes a complete organism, a single body, with an equality between all the parts; like the love existing within GOD. That's the unchanging message that the disciples are entrusted with until the end of the era.

It is no longer possible for the disciples to look to Jesus to do the liberating. They now had to take responsibility themselves. They extend Jesus' mission, *"to all the nations of the Earth"* (v.19a) with an assurance that the risen Jesus will remain with them throughout the period of the meantime (v.20).

**for sharing:**<sup>10</sup>

- *Like the early Christians, we must look to the future. Comment on Acts 1 : 1 – 11*
- *With the author of the Ephesians, we pray for a real understanding of the extraordinary grace of Christian existence. Comment on Ephesians 1 : 17 – 23*
- *By situating our lives within the history of GOD's presence to GOD's people, we can celebrate our faith freely and joyfully. Comment on Luke 24 : 46 - 53.*

**prayer:**<sup>11</sup>

*GOD of Majesty,*

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<sup>9</sup>Dt.4:40

<sup>10</sup>Lectio Divina: reading GOD's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of lectio divina requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of lectio divina. The steps don't have to have the following order: lectio (reading) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. meditatio (reflection) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. oratio (prayer) – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. contemplatio (rest) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'.

<sup>11</sup>The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

*Yours is the power that raised Christ from death,  
 Yours the glory that exalted him to Your right hand.  
 By the mystery of the Ascension,  
 sustain our hope as we bear witness to our baptism.  
 By the perpetual outpouring of Your Spirit,  
 confirm Your Church in its mission of salvation.  
 Grant this through Jesus Christ,  
 the firstborn from the dead,  
 who lives and reigns with You now and always  
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
 GOD for ever and ever. Amen.*

**review:**<sup>12</sup>

*We gather to celebrate Jesus' ascending on about the fortieth day after Easter Day as a matter of convenience. This timing of the celebration allows us to isolate one aspect of the total Easter event – the issue is about the continuation of the Christian community after the historical Jesus is absent. Jesus invited his disciples to come into a partnership with him to extend the divine work (see Jn.14:10-12).*

*Deeper into the farewell speech in the gospel of John, Jesus spoke of revealing GOD's name to those given him by his Father (cf. Jn.17:6). He prays that his disciples would remain true to the divine name in their practice (Jn.17:11). The image of partnership with GOD, whose name is revealed by Jesus, outlines the task to which disciples are called and to which they are to remain true. Jesus' prayer extends the work he (Jesus) was given by the Father. He prays for unity of destiny for all believers, just as there is a unity of destiny between Father and Son in the holy Spirit.*

*We are missioned to world-building. Our task is to express, transform and extend our world in accord with the pattern revealed in the mystery of GOD. Jesus didn't talk about a god in heaven, who is remote from would-be disciples. He talks about a GOD who is love; and about seeing GOD is a part of what we do; it is to see love. The GOD that Jesus presents isn't in heaven but in what people are doing. If we want to look for GOD, this is where we must search: GOD in the liberating practise of disciples.*

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<sup>12</sup>The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.