

## Ascension Sunday

*A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark: (Mk. 16: 15-20)*

Jesus showed himself to the Eleven, and said to them:

“Go out to the whole world proclaim the Good News to all creation.

He who believes and is baptised will be saved;

he who does not believe will be condemned.

These are the signs that will be associated with believers:

in my name they will cast out devils;

they will have the gift of tongues;

they will pick up snakes in their hands,

and be unharmed should they drink deadly poison;

they will lay their hands on the sick, who will recover.”

And so the Lord Jesus,

after he had spoken to them, was taken up to heaven:

there at the right hand of God he took his place,

while they, going out, preached everywhere,

the Lord working with them

and confirming the word by the signs that accompanied it.

*This is the Gospel of the Lord.*

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Dear Brothers and Sisters, Dear God’s Family:

This Sunday we celebrate the Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord into heaven.

I am sure you have a picture of the Ascension scene in your mind.

*Whenever we think about the Ascension of Jesus, our imagination takes us right away to the Mount of Olives. There we see Jesus surrounded by his apostles, lovingly blessing them for the last time, and then rising majestically higher and higher into the sky, until finally disappearing behind a white cloud.*

*Then we imagine Jesus entering the gates of heaven there to be welcomed by his Father and acclaimed by all the angels. Finally, we see the Father pointing out to Jesus a most beautiful throne at his right hand and proclaiming him Lord of angels, of men and of all things created.*

This is the picture of the Ascension of Jesus many of us have formed in our minds. We have built it up from the little the Scriptures say about the event and from the way it has been explained to us in the past.

There is nothing wrong in imagining the Ascension of Jesus the way described above, provided we keep in mind that with God, things do not happen the way we imagine them to happen. No one, while still in this world, ever saw God as he really is or witnessed his glory and his beauty.

- The purpose of this feast of Ascension is not to find out how things really took place when Jesus went back to his Father; that will be revealed to us only on reaching heaven.

The reason that moved the Church, led by the Spirit, to establish today's feast is as follows:

- to praise the Father for the unique glory bestowed on his Son Jesus as a reward for having carried out in the world the task of saving mankind.
- to make all Christians aware that, in Jesus' plans, they are now the ones to carry out the task that He came to accomplish in the world: to lead all men to salvation.
- To make it known to all Christians that after Ascension it is the mode of Jesus' presence that has changed. He is still present, through the Holy Spirit, in the Church, in the word of God proclaimed and prayed, in the sacraments.

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Our basic source of faith is the Scriptures; but it is really surprising how little the Gospels say about this important event in the life of Jesus:

- Neither Matthew nor John mentions the event.
- Mark has just two lines about it; we have heard them in today's Gospel: "Jesus was taken up to heaven there at the right hand of God he took his place" (Mk. 16: 19)
- In his Gospel, Luke adds a few more details, i.e., that Jesus took his apostles out of Jerusalem, till near Bethany, and there he blessed them. Then he adds: "As he blessed them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven" (Lk. 24: 51). Luke concludes his Gospel by telling us that the Apostles returned to Jerusalem full of joy.

It is at the beginning of his other book, the *Acts of the Apostles*, that Luke narrates the event a bit more at length as we have heard in the first reading of this Sunday.

- The lack of details about the Ascension of Jesus should not disappoint us; neither should we be disappointed by the fact that this event in the life of Jesus is merely stated or just hinted at in various passages of the New Testament: Acts 2: 33; 7: 55; Rom. 8: 34; Eph. 1: 20; Col. 3: 1; Heb. 8: 12; 10: 12; 12: 2; 1 Pet. 3: 22.

For all their brevity, these passages convey crystal clear a common message, as follows: *That Jesus, after his resurrection, entered the glory of his Father, and as a reward for his obedience in carrying out the task of saving mankind, the Father made Jesus, both God and man, Lord of all angels, of all men and of all things created.*

This is best expressed by Paul in his letter to the Christians of Philippi when he writes:

*"Because Jesus was obedient even to accepting death, death on a cross, God raised him on high, and gave him the name which is greater than all other names, so that all beings, in the heavens, on earth and the world below will fall on their knees, and all will openly proclaim that Jesus Christ is the Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2: 8-11).*

- In the Roman empire, the title "the Lord" was reserved to the emperor; this meant that the emperor had the right of life or death over all his subjects and could dispose of anything in his empire as he pleased.

Early Christians did not hesitate to break the law and ascribe that title to Jesus. He, and not the emperor, had absolute dominion over everyone and everything. Angels and men submit to him out of love, while the devils do it out of fear.

- Such is the wonderful meaning of the feast we are celebrating: we rejoice at having as Lord one who is so powerful and so loving, whose only concern is to save us.

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In learning or explaining our Christian faith, we should always be careful to stress what is really important, rather than the details which Scripture makes use of in narrating things or events.

Coming to the Ascension of Jesus, what really matters is what we have said above, i.e., that Jesus went back to his Father, and that he is now the Lord of everyone and of everything.

- Luke gives various details in his narration of the Ascension of Jesus. These details are meant to help us better understand the central message which the Ascension of Jesus conveys, as given above. They also help us to better understand the language of the Scriptures. Let us now try to answer some questions about those details found in the Acts of the Apostles.

*Did Jesus go back to his Father exactly 40 days after his resurrection?*

- We shall never understand the Scriptures correctly, unless we try to understand the ways of speaking and writing of the people when the various books of the Bible were written.

For the Jews, certain numbers like 3, 7, 10, 12 and numbers which are obtained by multiplying these ones are considered as “perfect numbers”, or even as “holy numbers.”

- Let us take a few examples from Scripture:

- The people of Israel entered the Promised Land after 40 years of wandering through the desert.
- The prophet Elijah walked for 40 days through the desert after being fed by an angel.
- Jesus fasted for 40 days in the desert before starting his preaching, and as we have read today, continued to appear to his apostles for 40 days after his resurrection.

- In ancient times people used these numbers to express that something had been done really well and according to God's plans.

- Therefore, Jesus may have appeared to his apostles exactly for 40 days, but what Luke means to tell us is that he appeared to them “for some time”, as established by his Father, and then did not do so again. Keep this in mind: often numbers in the Bible, should not be taken literally.

*Another question is: Did Jesus really “go up” to heaven? - Where is heaven?*

- Again, here the Bible speaks the way people ordinarily speak.

- The Jews divided the universe into three regions: the region above the sky, where they thought, God lived.
- the region of the earth, where man lives from birth to death.
- and the region inside the earth, which they called “the Sheol”, the place for the dead.

- We too speak in a similar way and point to the sky as the place for heaven, while we imagine hell to be somewhere deep into the ground.

Yet, heaven is neither above nor below. It is not so much a place as a state; heaven is where God is; to be in heaven means to be with God, to share in full his life and his joy.

- You remember the episode at the transfiguration: Peter and his companions witnessed just a glimpse of Jesus' glory and went out of their senses out of sheer joy. They would have remained on the mountain for good! That was heaven for them!

- Therefore, when Scripture tells us that Jesus ascended into heaven, its purpose is not to let us know whether he went up or down, but that he entered into the glory of his Father.

*When did Jesus enter into the glory of his Father, in other words, when did he “ascend into heaven?”*

- Obviously, the very moment he rose from the dead. To do so, he need not absent himself from this world; in fact, he continued to appear to his apostles at various times, but he already enjoyed the glory of his Father.

*But in that case, is there any meaning in keeping the feast we are celebrating today?*

- There is; we celebrate Jesus' entrance into glory; we do not worry when this actually took place.

- And Luke is *not telling us lies* when he says that Jesus continued to appear to his apostles for 40 days. He means to say that he appeared to them for a period of time, and then “withdrew from them” (Lk. 24: 51); that is, he did not let himself to be seen again as they had occasionally seen him after his resurrection.

- All this proves just one thing: the kindness of Jesus in showing himself to the apostle in a way they could understand, and at his last apparition, in withdrawing from them by going upwards, that is, in the direction in which the apostles thought heaven to be.

He still follows the same method: he manifests himself to each person in the way he knows to be most suitable for each one to discover his love.

On going back to his Father Jesus entrusted his disciples with a mission: to let people know of his Father's plans to save them and to urge them to respond to God's love and be thus saved:

- All the three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke speak of the task which Jesus entrusted to his disciples. They were to continue the work he had come to accomplish on earth: “Preach the Gospel to all mankind” (Mk. 16: 16).

The message of Jesus could be put as follows: *My work on earth is now over; it is your turn now; my Father's plans are that you continue my work. I appoint you my messengers to all men. Tell them that my Father longs to forgive their sins, and wants them all home in heaven with him. I have opened the gates of heaven and open they will remain for anyone to enter who wishes to.*

- But Jesus did not just entrust his apostles with his task and then left them to themselves; he was well aware that they had not in themselves the strength to carry out a work far above human strength.

Hence he assured them of two things:

- Of his presence in their midst. His absence would be more apparent than real. He is still present to us especially in the Church, in her sacraments. The way Jesus' made himself present before the ascension has now changed.

- Of the assistance of the Holy Spirit whom he had already given to them on the day of his resurrection but whom he would send to them with particular abundance a few days later on Pentecost day.

This double conviction explains the last sentence in the Gospel of Luke: “The apostles went back to Jerusalem full of joy” (Lk. 24: 52).

*We might be a bit surprised to read that. We might wonder: how could the disciples go back to Jerusalem full of joy; instead they should be in sorrow that the Lord has left them all alone!*

Yes that is true! One would expect them to go back home sad and discouraged at the thought that they would not see their Master again. No, the Spirit within them was already assuring them of Jesus' continuous presence in their midst, and of his trust in them when entrusting to them the very work he had come to do on earth: the preaching of the Good News. Those were motives to rejoice and rejoice deeply.

*Dear Brothers and sisters, Christ entered his glory both as God and as man. He is “Our Lord”, the Lord of angels, of men and of all things. We rejoice at this: we are happy to be ruled by a Lord who is both powerful and loving.*

His love and trust for us is shown by the fact that he has entrusted us with the continuation of the very work he came to accomplish on earth.

Two things should make us go about our work with joy and with determination: the fact that Jesus is with us at all times and his Spirit guides us and strengthens us.

We have good reasons to rejoice at the Ascension of Jesus, at his going back to his Father. There will be an “ascension-day” for us too, at our death, when Jesus will receive us into his Father's glory.

*Let us pray: God, Our Father, we rejoice at the entrance into glory of your Son Jesus Christ; his ascension is our glory and our hope; help us to follow him in our way to heaven. We ask this through Christ Our Lord. Amen.*