

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Ascension of the Lord
24 May 2020



Collect

Gladden us with holy joys, almighty God,
and make us rejoice with devout thanksgiving,
for the Ascension of Christ your Son
is our exaltation,
and, where the Head has gone before in glory,
the Body is called to follow in hope.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Or:

Grant, we pray, almighty God,
that we, who believe that your Only Begotten Son, our Redeemer,
ascended this day to the heavens,
may in spirit dwell already in heavenly realms.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

Only one verse in the entire New Testament makes chronological reference to the ascension. In Acts 1:3, Luke states that Jesus continued to appear to the disciples for forty days after his resurrection. He goes on to present his account of Jesus being taken up into heaven.

In spite of this ancient witness, the first testimony to the celebration of “Ascension Thursday” in Rome does not appear until around the year 500. Originally the fifty days of the Easter season were celebrated as a single unit culminating in the feast of Pentecost. Gradually, however, this unity broke down until the season was divided between the forty days leading to Ascension, and the ten days from there to Pentecost. Pentecost itself became a separate feast with an octave.

Since Vatican II we have largely recovered the initial unity of the Easter season. But not quite, because the document governing the liturgical year still refers to the weekdays between Ascension and Pentecost as a preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit. In Australia Luke’s chronology is not taken literally; the Ascension of the Lord is transferred to the following Sunday.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles 1:1–11

In my earlier work, *Theophilus*, I dealt with everything Jesus had done and taught from the beginning until the day he gave his instructions to the apostles he had chosen through the Holy Spirit, and was taken up to heaven. He had shown himself alive to them after his Passion by many demonstrations: for forty days he had continued to appear to them and tell them about the kingdom of God. When he had been at table with them, he had told them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for what the Father had promised. ‘It is’ he had said ‘what you have heard me speak about: John baptised with water but you, not many days from now, will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.’

Now having met together, they asked him, ‘Lord, has the time come? Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know times or dates that the Father has decided by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth.’

As he said this he was lifted up while they looked on, and a cloud took him from their sight. They were still staring into the sky when suddenly two men in white were standing near them and they said, ‘Why are you men from Galilee standing here looking into the sky? Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, this same Jesus will come back in the same way as you have seen him go there.’

First Reading

Luke uses the ascension as the hinge between his two works. His gospel concludes with a brief reference to the ascension, and Acts opens with a longer account. This is what we hear first every year.

The reading begins in a rhetorical style that echoes that of the prologue to Luke’s gospel. He follows the literary custom of the time by beginning his work with a dedication, to his presumed patron Theophilus.

The passage as a whole serves as a recapitulation of the last chapter of the gospel, covering the period between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. But the description of the ascension is more extended.

The reader will need to do justice to the formality of the first part of the reading. It calls for a degree of gravity; the writer is establishing his credentials. The passage then becomes a narrative of events that are described with sufficient detail for listeners to be able to enter imaginatively into the action. As moderns, they may find themselves mentally dissenting from the ancient cosmology that has Jesus ascending into the sky, but this is not the reader’s concern.

Further on there is dialogue and direct speech. These different elements provide readers with the opportunity to exercise their skills and deliver an engaging proclamation of the text.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 46:2-3, 6-9

R. God mounts his throne to shouts of joy:
a blare of trumpets for the Lord.
or

R. Alleluia.

All peoples, clap your hands,
cry to God with shouts of joy!
For the Lord, the Most High, we must fear,
great king over all the earth. **R.**

God goes up with shouts of joy;
the Lord goes up with trumpet blast.
Sing praise for God, sing praise,
sing praise to our king, sing praise. **R.**

God is king of all the earth.
Sing praise with all your skill.
God is king over the nations;
God reigns on his holy throne. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 46/47 is one of a group of psalms called “enthronement psalms” because they appear to be connected with festivals celebrating divine kingship. Clearly this psalm is inspired by an especially festive celebration. There is reference to singing, clapping, blaring trumpets, royal progress, and perhaps some ritual of enthronement. It is full of exuberance.

Readers and congregation alike may find it difficult to enter spontaneously into this excess of enthusiasm, but the text deserves to be proclaimed in an energetic spirit of praise. The response is taken from within the psalm itself.

How God’s claim of sovereignty over his people related to the role of earthly kings in Israel is addressed elsewhere in the Old Testament.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Ephesians

1:17-23

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a spirit of wisdom and perception of what is revealed, to bring you to full knowledge of him. May he enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see what hope his call holds for you, what rich glories he has promised the saints will inherit and how infinitely great is the power that he has exercised for us believers. This you can tell from the strength of his power at work in Christ, when he used it to raise him from the dead and to make him sit at his right hand, in heaven, far above every Sovereignty, Authority, Power, or Domination, or any other name that can be named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come. He has put all things under his feet, and made him as the ruler of everything, the head of the Church; which is his body, the fullness of him who fills the whole creation.

Second Reading

The second reading for Ascension changes from year to year. Twice it is from the letter to the Ephesians, once from Hebrews. Each text offers a theological reflection on the meaning of the feast. This year’s reading is both a beautiful prayer and a confession of faith, taken from the first chapter of Ephesians. Most of this chapter is devoted to prayer; we hear the final part.

This begins with a wish that the Ephesians will grasp how glorious is the destiny that lies in store for them as Christians. It grounds this prayer in the power of God who raised Jesus from the dead and established him as head of the Church and ruler of creation. The author of the letter offers us a grand vision that encompasses the whole of reality: everything in heaven and on earth is filled with the fullness of the risen Lord.

Beautiful as it is, the text is not without its challenges for the reader. The sentences are long, the content is theologically weighty, and the tone is elevated. The whole passage will repay close scrutiny. Readers will need to distinguish between the core assertion of each sentence and the thoughts that flow from this. Only then can they be sure of enabling the congregation to hear and understand the message. This is not a text to be rushed through, but one we might well pray sincerely for one another.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Matthew**

28:16–20

The eleven disciples set out for Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had arranged to meet them. When they saw him they fell down before him, though some hesitated. Jesus came up and spoke to them. He said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.'

Gospel

The gospel text consists of the last five verses of Matthew's gospel. It does not contain a description of the ascension, though the commission Jesus gives the Eleven implies his imminent departure. This is the paradox: Jesus is to become absent even as he promises his disciples to be "with you always; yes, to the end of time".

As is true of many of the stories of Jesus' appearances after his resurrection, there is a tantalising degree of obscurity and ambiguity. Why did Jesus direct them to Galilee (28:10)? On what mountain are they meeting and what significance might this have? Why were some overcome with awe while others hesitated?

For all this uncertainty, Jesus' commission to the Eleven is crystal clear. They are sent on a universal mission, with a mandate to teach and to baptise. The Trinitarian formula is exceptional in the New Testament; its inclusion here may reflect baptismal practice in Matthew's own community. The whole gospel concludes as it began: with the absolute assurance of the enduring presence of Emmanuel, God with us.

Concluding Prayers

Almighty and all-merciful God,
lover of the human race, healer of all our wounds,
in whom there is no shadow of death,
save us in this time of crisis;
grant wisdom and courage to our leaders;
watch over all medical people
as they tend the sick and work for a cure;
stir in us a sense of solidarity beyond all isolation;
if our doors are closed, let our hearts be open.
By the power of your love destroy the virus of fear,
that hope may never die
and the light of Easter, the triumph of life,
may shine upon us and the whole world.
Through Jesus Christ, the Lord risen from the dead,
who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.

Holy Mary, health of the sick, pray for us.
St Joseph, guardian of us all, pray for us.

(Most Rev. Mark Coleridge, Archbishop of Brisbane)

or

Gracious God,
We give thanks anew for your providence and presence.
We prayerfully seek your grace, amidst COVID-19 here and overseas.
We pray for those in need of healing.
We pray for your peace with those who are anxious or grieving.
We pray you will continue to strengthen and sustain
all those who are serving in response.
We pray for your Holy Spirit's discernment
amidst the many choices and decisions
facing our national, community and medical leaders.
We pray we each might see quickly what more we can do
to help those who are vulnerable.
This prayer for our nation in the family of nations,
with all that is on our hearts,
we gather now and pray
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

(Ecumenical prayer from the National Council of Churches. We have been invited to pray this prayer at 7pm each day.)

