

Ascension of the Lord, Year A

" This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11)

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As the novel coronavirus shows signs of subsiding, we are celebrating the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord today. The measures for this virus are entering a key stage now. Let each of us continue to pray in accord with Pope Francis and do all we can to help one another, especially those who are suffering at this time, while avoiding the spread of the infection.

Today's first reading is from the Acts of the Apostles, written by the evangelist of the Gospel according to Luke. The Ascension of the Lord is also described in the Gospel according to Matthew, in which Jesus delivers his final words to the disciples (Matthew 28:16-20). In today's sermon, we will focus on the first 11 verses from the Acts of the Apostles. They consist of a short prologue, the promise of the Holy Spirit and the ascension of Jesus.

The two writings by Luke are dedicated to Theophilus. (Acts 1:1-2)

First, the name Theophilus catches our attention. It was for him that Luke wrote two books, the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. They are like a single book with two different steps. The first shows how Jesus' life and evangelization continues in the community formed by the disciples through the work of the Holy Spirit, and the second shows how the movement of Jesus spread throughout the Greek and Roman world.

A large number of people appear in the Acts of the Apostles. Among them are the mother of Jesus at first, then Peter, who would become a central figure in the early church, and finally Paul, the great missionary who would travel around the Mediterranean world to make Jesus the Savior known to all people.

We know that all the other disciples of Jesus also went to far-off lands to preach the gospel. These things are not recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, but they have been passed down in the tradition of the Church.

Let us go back to the name Theophilus. It means a "friend of God" in Greek. In a sense, we are all Theophilus, and Luke wrote these two books for all of us. The important thing we need to remember is that the history of the early church Luke recorded in the Acts of the Apostles is based on the evangelization of Jesus written in the Gospel by the same evangelist.

Just as Luke wrote in the Acts, countless Christian communities have emerged and faced many difficulties to survive throughout the last two millennia. That's why we read through the Acts of the Apostles during Easter Season every year to go back to our roots and renew our memories of who we are as Christians and witnesses to the risen Jesus.

The promise of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:3-5)

Before telling the history of the church about to be born, Luke introduces the two stages of preparation for the disciples: The forty days when the risen Jesus worked with the community and the days when the disciples are in prayer before the coming of the Holy Spirit. Luke records the ascension of Jesus between these two stages.

The first stage had 40 days. It is important to note that the symbol of 40 is emphasized: Moses was on the mountain for 40 days (Exodus 24:18); Elijah traveled to the mountain of God for 40 days (1 Kings 19:8); and Jesus was tempted in the desert for 40 days (Luke 4:2). The number 40 can be said to indicate a time of trial, a time of doubt, and a time of decision. The disciples went through the same situation. Although the risen Jesus was with them, they were perplexed and some doubted one another (Matthew 28:17). Luke emphasizes that Jesus, who shared his earthly life with them, is risen now and here. Jesus tells the apostles not to leave Jerusalem, and then leaves a promise that they will be baptized in the Holy Spirit before long.

The ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:6-11, Luke 24:50-52)

Luke is the only evangelist in the New Testament that describes with admiration how Jesus ascended into heaven. What does this mean?

Jesus convinced the disciples that he is alive by staying with them for forty days. This Jesus knew them and shared those unforgettable days with them. Throughout the story of the ascension, Luke says that Jesus will indeed come among us, but in a different way. The

cloud that covered Jesus when he ascended into heaven does not represent his absence but his presence in a different form.

From here on out, Jesus is with us through His Spirit. The Holy Spirit will help us remember what Jesus said and did on earth and give an inspiration to our way of life through what is pointed here.

At the end of this scene, Luke shows the disciples helplessly gazing up toward heaven. Then two men in white robes say to them, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" When the disciples return to Jerusalem, hard work is awaiting them there. Among many people who would show them rejection, scorn or indifference they had to start preaching the gospel of Jesus.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.... I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to help us respond to this final call of Jesus. Let us strongly ask him for the desire to bring Jesus and his gospel message to all who do not know him yet. To that end, let us first ask for the grace that we the baptized members of the Church may be filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit just like the brothers and sisters of the early community described by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles.

Prayer

(Prayer written by Pope John Paul II in 1998 for the second year of preparation for the Great Jubilee of the year 2000)

COME, SPIRIT OF LOVE AND PEACE!

Spirit of truth, you who search the depths of God,
memory and prophecy in the Church,
lead mankind to recognize in Jesus of Nazareth
the Lord of glory, the Saviour of the world,
the supreme fulfilment of history.

Come, Spirit of love and peace!

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Spirit of life, by whose power the Word was made flesh
in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the woman of attentive silence,
make us docile to the promptings of your love
and ever ready to accept the signs of the times
which you place along the paths of history.

Come, Spirit of love and peace!

Note: All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE).