

Ascension of the Lord

Year A



FIRST READING
Acts 1:1-11

PSALM
Psalm 47:2-3, 6-9

SECOND READING
Ephesians 1:17-23

GOSPEL
Matthew 28:16-20

PRAYER

Psalm 47:2-3, 6-9

Clap your hands, all peoples,
acclaim God with shouts of joy.
For Yahweh, the Most High,
is glorious,
the great king over all the earth.
God goes up to shouts of acclaim,
Yahweh to a fanfare
on the ram's horn.
Let the music sound
for our God, let it sound,
let the music sound
for our king, let it sound.
For he is king
of the whole world;
learn the music,
let it sound for God!
God reigns over the nations,
seated on his holy throne.

READING THE WORD

First Reading
Acts 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. While 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, not many days from now, you are going to be baptised with the Holy Spirit.'

Now having met together, they asked him, 'Lord, has the time come for you 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 the power of the Holy Spirit which will come on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to earth's remotest end.'

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 as he went, when suddenly

two men in white were standing beside them, and they said, 'Why are you Galileans standing here looking into the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will come back in the same way as you have seen him go to heaven.'

Second Reading
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, how rich is the glory of the heritage he offers among his holy people, and how extraordinarily great is the power that he has exercised for us believers; this accords with the strength of his power at work in Christ, the power which he exercised in raising him from the dead and enthroning him at his right hand, in heaven, far above every principality, ruling force, power or sovereignty, 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 he is above all things, the head of the Church; which is his Body, the fullness of him who is filled, all in all.

Gospel

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 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 look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.'

HEARING THE WORD

“Authority and Power”

The Feast of Ascension celebrates Jesus' ascent to God's side in heaven. This event completes his mission on earth and makes him the glorified Lord of the entire creation with absolute authority over all that God had made. On this feast we are drawn to reflect on the issues of authority and power which repeatedly occur in the three readings.

The first reading covers

the opening section of the book of Acts. In these few verses St Luke dedicates his work to the friend and sponsor Theophilus, and alludes to the Gospel where Jesus' life and mission were presented in some detail. The focus here, however, rests on Jesus' departure, his ascension. The ascension and Jesus' subsequent enthronement on God's side has to be seen as the true foundation of the Church. The Holy Spirit, whose presence would empower the disciples to carry out their mission to the ends of the earth, descended upon the disciples only after Jesus' ascent to the Father. Thus, ascension was the necessary precondition for the sending of the Spirit whose presence, in turn, became the starting point for the Church.

The issues of authority and power arise in this context. Jesus' ascent to heaven placed him on God's side. This act, called the “enthronement”, signifies that Jesus received divine authority. But St Luke shows that Jesus intended to delegate it to his disciples who would remain on earth. Even before his departure to the Father he instructed the disciples to remain in Jerusalem and patiently wait for the gift of the Spirit. He promises that they will “receive the power of the Holy Spirit”. The Holy Spirit will empower the disciples with the strength that comes from Jesus. As the glorified Lord he delegates his power and authority to the disciples. Importantly, Jesus does not consider them as mere tools to car-

ry out his commands but rather as participants in the very authority that he now has. This delegation and sharing of his power is done through the Holy Spirit. We can detect here some differences between how God's authority was exercised in the Old Testament and then after Jesus' ascension. In the Old Testament, God usually issues direct commands which are carried out swiftly and unquestionably. But after the coming of the Holy Spirit, God acts through the people who carry out his will of their own accord, directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. We could say that the Holy Spirit enables people to act on behalf of God in the world. This was made possible by Jesus' incarnation as a human being, and the subsequent transformation of human hearts by the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit. Jesus the glorified Lord does not jealously guard his power and authority but shares it with his disciples. Through them he also shares it with his other followers.

The letter to the Ephesian is a masterly exposition on the Church and its nature, with a deep reflection on the foundation and nature of the Christian community. Today's short excerpt makes us aware of the extraordinary gift we have received from God through Jesus. The author aims to make Christians fully appreciate and understand “how rich is the glory of the heritage he [God] offers among his holy people”. Christians have been given

an unparalleled dignity and gift by being called to faith, and being promised eternal life in God's presence because of Jesus' resurrection. The author then turns to the issue of power. He writes: "how extraordinarily great is the power that he [God] has exercised for us believers." God exercised this power in and through Jesus first by raising him from the dead, and subsequently bringing him to his right hand and making him the glorified Lord with power over the entire creation. This brief but extraordinarily rich passage ends with a description of the Church as the body of Christ. It is a remarkable image. Christ, the supreme Lord of all creation is not a remote and authoritarian ruler but identifies with this Church as with his own body. Unquestionably, Christ holds the supreme authority. But he exercises it not through an authoritarian imposition of his will but through the harmonious union that exists between the head and the body. This harmony and inclusion are perhaps best described by the word "love". The supreme authority and power exercised by Christ on behalf of God is the power of an all-permeating love that governs in order to sustain and direct.

The conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew is often called "the great commission" as the disciples are sent on a mission to all nations. How-

ever, once again the issue of authority is present. Even though Matthew does not describe Jesus' ascension, the disciples' act of worshipping him and the words, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me", unquestionably present Jesus as the glorified Lord over all creation. His command to make disciples of all nations by baptism discloses the way in which Jesus wants his power and authority to be used. By baptism the disciples are to bring people into the community of believers, thus ensuring their salvation.

Jesus assures the disciples of his enduring presence while they carry out this task. Their work will be Jesus' work and Jesus' power will be their power. This passage makes us keenly aware that Jesus uses his power as the glorified Lord for the salvation of all humankind.

The feast of Ascension celebrates the successful completion of Jesus' mission of bringing God's kingdom into the world and opening the path to salvation to all humanity. In the course of this mission he put himself entirely in the service of this purpose. The outcome of his self-sacrifice was endowment with unparalleled dig-

nity, complete authority and supreme power as the glorified Lord of creation. Yet, even in that supreme position Jesus places his power and authority completely in the service of human salvation. He delegates his power to his disciples through the gift of the Spirit, as we see in Acts. He exercises this power through love that sustains the Church community, as we are taught in Ephesians. Finally, he uses his power for the salvation of all nations by leading them to faith by the work of his disciples, as we see in Matthew. In antiquity, the power of gods terrified people who thought that the divine might could be used against them. How different is our God who uses his supreme power through Jesus Christ for our salvation! Having such a God, we indeed proclaim the good news when with the Psalmist we sing "Yahweh, the Most High, is glorious, the great king over all the earth".

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

God's equation: "power + authority = love", is contrary to the way many of us have experienced power and authority. Sadly, the dominant equation in our society is: "power + authority = control, fear and abuse". This equation is destructive wherever and whenever it is applied, whether in the private sphere such as the family home, or in public spheres such as schools, workplaces and politics. Children have been harmed by authoritative and abu-

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The ascension and Jesus' subsequent enthronement on God's side has to be seen as the true foundation of the Church.

sive parents, and entire nations destroyed by dictatorial power of hungry and egocentric politicians. These experiences of abuse of power make it difficult for many of us to imagine that anything good and life giving can come from those with power and authority. Despite this dominant view, there are instances in African history when leaders have sacrificed their lives for the liberation of their nations. Sadly, this legacy has not continued and political power has lost its sacrificial role for the common good. Similarly, some children have flourished because of the sacrificial love, power and authority of parents. These examples of alternatives to the dominant power equation enable us to better understand God's equation.

We have so far discussed how other people have used power and authority. Now, we will reflect on how we use the power and authority that we have. We may think that because we do not have positions of power in our work places or in politics we have no power or authority whatsoever. In truth, we all have some power and authority over someone, even if it is only over our own lives! The message in today's readings contains an invitation to embrace God's equation of power and authority and replicate it in our lives. That kind of power is

desperately needed on our continent.

The temptations that come with power and authority are so great that, left to ourselves, we would not be able to implement the power equation of God with our own powers. Fortunately, we are not left alone but have the Holy Spirit as a constant companion to empower and guide us. The Holy Spirit invites us to share in God's power and follow the example of Jesus' life of love and sacrifice. As we celebrate the feast of the Ascension of Jesus we are reminded of God's equation of power in the life and mission of Jesus, who healed, liberated and brought salvation to all. He did not use this power to escape the challenges of life, but rather to confront and overcome these through the cross and resurrection. In our world, where the dominant equation of power reigns, we are called to live and demonstrate a different kind of power and authority that loves, serves and sacrifices.

PROVERB

"A bird does not sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song."

ACTION

Self-examination:

Reflect on both negative and positive experiences of

power in your life. How have these experiences affected the way you exercise power in your areas of influence? Which equation dominates in your life – God's or the dominant one?

Response to God:

Confess and ask for forgiveness for times when you have used power and authority in ways that harm others.

Pray for healing of abuses perpetrated by those in power and authority in your country.

Response to your World:

Abuse of power is rampant in our societies and is one of the causes of trauma and fear in our communities. Resolve to challenge abuse of power starting with your immediate relationships, your wider community, parish and government.

PRAYER

*Lord give us
the same mind
as that of your Son
Jesus Christ who,
existing in the form of God,
did not count equality with God
a thing to be grasped
and possessed for himself,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a servant.
Amen*