

Bible Study

Solemnity of the Ascension of Our Lord, cycle C

In most dioceses of the United States the bishops exercised their option to move the Solemnity of the Ascension from a Thursday to this Sunday. Therefore, these reflections are offered in place of the 7th Sunday of Easter.

Opening Prayer: (Sign of the Cross) Lord Jesus Christ, ever-living Messiah, in order that we might share with you eternal life and joy, you descended from your throne in heaven and lived among us, died for us, and rose triumphant over death. We celebrate your resurrection and your return to heaven, where you reign as King. May our lives express the joy and love that we celebrate today. Amen.

Focusing Questions

1. Tell about one encounter of God's presence that you experienced during the last week.
2. Have these 6 weeks since Easter Sunday felt like a celebration of Resurrection to you? Please comment.

Commentary before the First Reading: Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11

One of the ways we know that Saint Luke is the author of both the Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles is the addressing of both books to "Theophilus." Another is the similarity between the last chapter of his Gospel and the first chapter of Acts. Jesus had proven to the Apostles that he had indeed risen from the dead. However, he still needed to reassure them that things would make more sense after the descent of the Holy Spirit, and he knew they needed to see him ascend from this world so that they would understand the Holy Spirit's coming in ten days. Therefore, he granted them this privileged moment.

Read the First Reading aloud.

1. When you close your eyes and imagine this scene, which detail stands out most clearly for you?
2. Luke was not one of the Apostles. Identify 2 or 3 lines that support his claim that what he writes is the truth.
3. Which line shows that the Apostles still did not fully understand Jesus' mission? What *did* they expect?
4. What is important about verse 11?
5. Who is Theophilus?

Commentary before the Second Reading: Hebrews 9:24-28 and 10:19-23

Before you read the selection from Hebrews, a little background will help. Reading Leviticus 17:11 and the footnote for it, along with that for Leviticus 17:3, will help. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the high priest entered the most sacred part of the Temple in Jerusalem and offered a lamb's blood for the forgiveness of the sins of the people. Scripture scholars have said that Jesus' Jewish disciples would not have understood the salvation gained for them, if he had not died a death in which his blood was shed for the sake of others.

Read the Second Reading aloud.

1. In light of Yom Kippur, what is the author of Hebrews trying to show with all this writing about "blood"?
2. Explain in simpler words why Jesus only had to shed his blood once for all sins, instead of dying repeatedly for our repeated sins?
3. If salvation (vs. 28) does not refer to the forgiveness of sins, what *will* happen at the moment of salvation?
4. What is Jesus' role in heaven, according to what you read in the first sentences?
5. How does Jesus' sacrifice affect the way we should pray and the way we should live?

Commentary before the Gospel Reading: Luke 24:46-53

It was important from a Jewish point of view that Jesus had fulfilled the Hebrew Scriptures. However, in spite of what Saint Luke wrote in verse 46 of this reading, referring to the Suffering Servant portions of the Book of Isaiah, there is no Old Testament passage that *explicitly* said the Messiah would suffer, die, and rise on the third day for the forgiveness of sins. It is evidence of how the new Christians immediately began interpreting the *implications* of the Old Testament in the light of their experience of Jesus.

Read the Gospel Reading aloud.

1. Luke set the ascension on a hill called Mount Olivet near Bethany, just 3 miles from Jerusalem. Which famous Gospel family lived in Bethany (*John 11:1*)? What else happened on Mount Olivet (*Luke 22:39*)?
2. What was “the promise of the Father” mentioned in verse 49?
3. To which event does the other sentence in verse 49 refer? Could it have happened without the ascension taking place first?
4. Which 2 actions marked the disciples’ reaction to seeing Jesus leave them and ascend to heaven?
5. Jesus promised to give his disciples power and authority for the sake of the Kingdom. What is the difference between authority for its own sake and authority for the sake of the Kingdom?

Applying the Readings to our Daily Lives

1. Would you say that this feast is more a commemoration Jesus’ leaving his followers behind or that it is more a celebration of the union of Jesus with the Church for all time? Explain.
2. What sort of authority has Jesus given you for the Kingdom?
3. Name some areas of your life that would be difficult or impossible without the “promise of the Father,” the Holy Spirit.
4. “Our confession ...gives us hope.” (*Hebrews 10:23*) In other words, faith is what makes it possible for us to hope, to trust that God is real and all God said is true. Hope gives us the freedom to love. Living in love deepens our faith. Thus, the 3 theological virtues are dependent on one another. How does your life express hope?
5. How could it express hope even more?

Closing Prayer

(It is an ancient custom of the Church to pray every day between the Solemnity of the Ascension and the Solemnity of Pentecost that there might be a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon each of us and on the world. You might want to offer this prayer every day until Pentecost.)

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. If you send forth your Spirit, we shall be recreated, and you will renew the face of the earth. We lift this prayer with confidence, for you live and reign with the Father and the Son, One God, for ever and ever. Amen. (Sign of the Cross)