

This series of readings from Acts has shown us the church growing from a timid group of people huddled together on Solomon's Portico to a religious force open to the whole world. The power of God was at work in all this. The power of God is still at work in the church now.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

What accommodations to the sensitivity of other believers does the church call for today?

In what elements of Christian faith and practice must there be conformity among believers?

The Ascension of the Lord (ABC)

Acts of the Apostles 1:1–11

The reading from Acts assigned for the observance of the Ascension of the Lord is of particular interest in at least two ways. First of all, it is one of the handful of First Readings that is read on a specific occasion each single year of the three-year cycle. It is a reading so important that the church insists that everybody hear it every year. The reason is clear. This reading gives us the most extensive treatment of Jesus' Ascension, the most detailed account of what we are celebrating. It is, as it were, the "constitutive reading" for the feast.

The second way in which our reading is particularly interesting is that it constitutes a linkage between the gospels and the rest of the New Testament. At the end of Luke's gospel (24:50–53) we have one account of Jesus' ascension. Here, in *Acts*, the second volume of Luke's two-volume work, we have another.

These narratives of the ascension of Jesus serve as a kind of overlap, therefore, between the story of Jesus' earthly life and ministry that is told in the gospel and the story of the church that is told in Acts, a story that constitutes the background for the whole rest of the New Testament.

The reading that is provided in the lectionary is in three parts, three paragraphs, as it were.

First of all, Luke very deliberately links this new work that he is beginning with his Gospel. Each is dedicated to the same individual, Theophilus. Luke reminds Theophilus, and us, what the Gospel had been about: the ministry and teaching of Jesus up to the end of his earthly association with his chosen apostles.

Next comes a section about Jesus' general activity during the time between his Resurrection and his Ascension. He strengthened their faith in his Resurrection and he taught them still more about the kingdom of God, which had been one of his main themes during his public life. He told them also that they were to be attentive to a further development: the coming of the Holy Spirit, who would give them a new relationship with God.

The third section is concerned with a specific occasion: the day of his Ascension. After all that Jesus had said about the kingdom, the disciples still seemed to think that the coming of the kingdom was to be a political event which would restore self-rule to Israel. Jesus—one more time!—tries to redirect their thinking. What they were to look for, he said, was not a political upheaval, but the power of the Holy Spirit which would make them witnesses to him “in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” In these words, Luke is giving us a kind of table of contents for the rest of Acts, a preview of how the preaching of the gospel would unfold.

Then comes Jesus' departure. A cloud took him from their

sight. In Sacred Scripture clouds are often the sign of God's presence. Jesus returns to his Father. The apostles seem to have been taken aback, and stood there looking up into the sky. Then two men in white appear, like the ones who had appeared to the puzzled women after Jesus' Resurrection (cf. Luke 24:4). These heavenly messengers tell the apostles to pull themselves together, and comfort them with the assurance that Jesus would come again, just as surely as they had seen him going away. As our passage closes, we are left with the apostles waiting, as Jesus had commanded, for what would happen next.

The Ascension is a kind of interim stage that marks both an end and a beginning. It marks the end of Jesus' physical, earthly presence and the beginning of the age of the church. Jesus' personal instruction of the apostles has now been concluded. They haven't grasped particularly well what he had tried to teach them about the kingdom, but now his Spirit would take over in a new beginning. And that Holy Spirit would guide and protect the community of faith, the church, from now on. The Spirit would continue to be with the church as its members carried out Jesus' behest to give witness to him. That age whose beginning is marked by the Ascension of Jesus is still going on. The task of giving witness to the risen Lord is still the mission in which we are all engaged as members of Christ and agents of the Holy Spirit.

But there is another way in which today's liturgical celebration involves a beginning and an end. We see the apostles poised for the beginning of the church as Jesus ascends to heaven. But we also see them alerted to the church's end, to the return of Christ when the church's mission will have been completed. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus come to conclusion in the church, the church of which we are a part. The

church will find conclusion in the return of the risen Christ in glory, a return to which we, also, look forward.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Who witnesses to the risen Christ to me?

To what extent is Jesus' return in glory an element of my spirituality?

Seventh Sunday of Easter (A)

Acts of the Apostles 1:12–14

In the general calendar of the church, this seventh Sunday of Easter is the Sunday between the celebration of the Ascension of the Lord (observed on the Thursday after the sixth Sunday of Easter) and the solemnity of Pentecost. In most dioceses of the United States, however, Ascension Day is transferred to the following Sunday, and thus supersedes the observance of the seventh Sunday of Easter.

In those dioceses where Ascension Day is still observed on the Thursday, the liturgy of the seventh Sunday of Easter serves as a kind of bridge between Ascension and Pentecost.

As is the case in all the Sundays of the Easter season, the First Reading on the seventh Sunday each year is from the Acts of the Apostles. In year A, the verses of the reading are the verses that follow immediately upon the narrative of Jesus' Ascension into heaven.

At the beginning of the ascension narrative (Acts 1:4), Jesus had told his followers (gathered on the Mount of Olives) not to leave Jerusalem. Now, having been encouraged by the heavenly

beings in white garments to be confident of Jesus' return, the disciples make the half-mile walk back to town. Our brief reading then tells us where they went, who was there and what they did.

They went back to "the upper room where they were staying." This may have been the same room in which they had gathered to eat the Passover dinner with Jesus, their last supper with him. It may also have been the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, that is referred to later in Acts (cf. 12:12). In any case, they were all together in the same place. (Scholars point out that the history of the early church that Acts offers us is structured in concentric circles: first the presence and preaching of the disciples in Jerusalem, starting in the upper room, then in Judea and Samaria, then among Gentile sympathizers, and finally among all the nations of the world. Their limitation to Jerusalem was only by way of beginning.)

The company consisted of the eleven leaders, whom we refer to as apostles, listed by name. Also present were "some women, / and Mary, the mother of Jesus." In addition there were "his brothers," blood relatives of Jesus whose exact relationship with him is not known. What we have here is a kind of membership roster of the infant church. There were probably other believers in Jesus around town, but this was the core of the Christian community. By the time Acts comes to an end in twenty-seven more chapters, this tiny group of women and men will have developed into a worldwide body of believers.

Gathered together in this way, "[a]ll these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer." As they looked forward to the coming of the Spirit that Jesus had promised (cf. 1:5) they spent their time in communion with God. This atmosphere of prayer seems to have been characteristic of the infant church. When

Luke gives a summary of their earliest days after the coming of the Spirit (Acts 2:42, NAB), he notes that they devoted themselves “to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.”

This is the last explicit mention of Mary, the mother of Jesus, that the New Testament gives us. It is her last appearance, as it were, but an appropriate appearance: as a member of the believing community, engaged in watchfulness and prayer, open to the next events in the history of salvation in which she has already played such an important role.

This reading is obviously intended to direct our attention to the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost that will be remembered and celebrated next Sunday. Our reading seems to cry out for the phrase, “to be continued” at its close.

But the continuation will be not only the account of the coming of the Spirit in Pentecost that comes in the next chapter. The continuation is also the life of the church, a life of togetherness in community, a life of ongoing prayer, a life of openness for the gifts of the Lord.

This Sunday’s little vignette of life in the infant church is not only a nugget of interesting historical information. It is also a pattern for the church’s life in the centuries to come. It is a design that we Christians of today are called to follow: togetherness with other believers, including Mary the mother of Jesus; ongoing dedication to communion with God in prayer; watchfulness for what the Lord has in store for us.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

What role does prayer play in my membership in the church?

What am I looking forward to from the Lord?

Seventh Sunday of Easter (B)

Acts of the Apostles 1:15–17, 20a, 20c–26

This reading from Acts is chosen for this Sunday between Ascension Day and Pentecost because the events recounted here took place during the days after Jesus had ascended into heaven but before the coming of the Holy Spirit on the first Christian Pentecost.

The followers of Jesus are gathered together. In the verses that immediately precede our reading (Acts 1:13 ff.), we saw a small group gathered in the upper room, newly returned from witnessing the ascension: the eleven apostles, some women, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. Now, some days later, it is a larger group, about a hundred and twenty. Perhaps Luke means for us to understand that the infant church had already begun to grow.

Peter gets up to speak to the assembly about Judas. First of all, he reassures them that Judas's betrayal of Jesus was not something that happened outside the foreknowledge of God. On the contrary, Judas's membership in the group of the twelve was the result of God's doing. He was "allotted" a share in the apostles' ministry. In addition, Psalm 109:8 long ago spoke of a wicked man being replaced in office by someone else.

It was now time to see to the replacement. The reason why Judas had to be replaced was so that the apostolic college would be restored to its full complement for the coming of the Spirit. Jesus seems to have looked on this group of twelve followers as the core of a new people, as representing and renewing the twelve tribes of Israel out of which God established his people after the exodus. The twelve apostles were to replace the twelve tribal patriarchs of old to establish a reconstituted Israel. In

addition, Jesus had told the apostles at the Last Supper (Luke 22:30) that, when the kingdom came at last, they would “sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (NRSV). The number was important and had to be maintained.

Peter lays down the criteria for Judas’s replacement. It was to be one of the men who had been with Jesus from the beginning of Jesus’ public life until Jesus was taken up to heaven. These requirements were important because the new apostle (together with the original ones) acted as a witness to the Resurrection of Jesus, and only someone who knew Jesus before his death could witness that the risen Jesus was the same one who had preached, worked miracles and died on the cross. It wasn’t just the number of apostles that was important, but their experience as well.

In response to Peter’s instructions, they put together a short ballot of two names and asked God to indicate which of these two was the one destined to join the apostolic college. Some means had been determined (“lots”) by which God could express his choice, and God chooses Matthias over “Joseph called Barsabbas” (NRSV). Matthias takes his place with the other eleven apostles. We hear nothing more about him in the New Testament, which may suggest that his importance consisted in his enumeration among the twelve rather than in any personal contributions he may have made to the life of the young church.

There seem to be two lessons for us in this little story from the early church. The first is that, from the very earliest days of the Christian community, there were distinct structures. The twelve apostles were a group different from the other members of the church. This is not to say that they were holier or more skilled in preaching and teaching than the other early Christians. It is to say that they were different, that they had a role to play that was not the same as the role of others who believed in Jesus.

And the preservation of this special group, this distinct structure was important enough to engage the attention of the entire Christian community and to call for a direct intervention from God.

The second lesson from this reading is that Peter was in charge. There was no question of who spoke for the community, who was to see to it that the will of Jesus would be followed. It was Peter, just as it would be Peter who spoke publicly in the name of the other eleven after the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:14). The leadership role didn't fall to him because he was the most intelligent, certainly not because he was the most faithful. It was simply that he was the one chosen by the Lord for this office.

Even at a time of waiting in the history of the embryonic community, the church was not without life. Even before the Holy Spirit brought the church to full birth, there were apostles and there was Peter.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

What qualities do I have that make me eligible to be a follower of the Lord?

How does God choose apostles today?

Seventh Sunday of Easter (C)

Acts of the Apostles 7:55–60

The story of Saint Stephen, the first martyr, takes up two whole chapters (six and seven) in the Acts of the Apostles. The story begins with the appointment of seven men (including Stephen)

to help the apostles. Stephen soon distinguishes himself through his disputes with foreign-born Jews about the relationship between Jesus and the religious culture of Judaism.

Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin and is asked to explain himself. He explains at great length in a speech that runs for some fifty-three verses, the longest of any of the speeches in Acts. His presentation involves a kind of survey of God's providence for his people beginning with Abraham, including God's liberation of the people through Moses. But the people turned from God and rejected Moses as well as the prophets who came after him. As regards the temple, Stephen says that it is a man-made building that God does not really need. The whole world is God's. He doesn't have to have an address in Jerusalem. By way of conclusion, Stephen points out to the members of the Sanhedrin that the people they represent have been disobedient and irreligious from the beginning. They have habitually killed the prophets that God sent for their salvation and finally have murdered the greatest of God's spokesmen, Jesus. God's gift of the law to the people has become totally irrelevant, twisted into something that God never intended, practically disregarded in all its most crucial elements.

Stephen has accused the Jews of being failures throughout the whole history of their relationship with God. Now, he says, the killing of Jesus has changed everything and a new level of association has begun between God and human beings, an association mediated by Jesus, an association in which the Mosaic law is no longer relevant. It's no wonder the Jews dissolved into rage and set about executing Stephen as a blasphemer.

This is where this Sunday's reading begins. Stephen says that he can actually see Jesus in heaven, standing at the right hand of God, i.e., in a position of supreme authority and honor. The

anger of the members of the Sanhedrin reaches a new height. They carry Stephen out of town, strip off their outer garments, and set about stoning him to death. In these last moments of his earthly life, Stephen prays as Jesus prayed on the cross. He asks for forgiveness for his persecutors (cf. Luke 23:34) and, as Jesus had commended his spirit to the Father (cf. Luke 23:46), so Stephen commends his spirit to the Lord Jesus.

The story of Stephen is an important component of the history of the early church as Acts hands it on to us. For the first time we have the proclamation that faith in Jesus has implications that put ancestral Judaism into a new position of relativity that makes its continued validity questionable. With the story of Stephen, Luke brings the Jerusalem phase of his history of the young church to a conclusion. From now on, the focus of the narrative will be increasingly wider until, when Acts reaches its conclusion, we have the Christian faith being proclaimed at the farthest ends of the earth.

But why is this reading presented for this Sunday between Ascension Day and Pentecost? Apparently because it offers testimony to the reality of Jesus' Ascension. Twice in two verses we hear that Stephen saw Jesus in heaven "standing at the right hand of God." Jesus' Ascension into heaven is not some sort of pious story. It is real. The Jesus that Stephen saw at the right hand of God is the same Jesus that the apostles had followed, the same Jesus that they had seen going up into heaven from the Mount of Olives.

But what Stephen saw does more than offer reassurance that Jesus is now in heaven after the conclusion of his earthly life. The glorious vision of the Son of Man also signifies Jesus' approval and affirmation of what Stephen had just said to the Sanhedrin, i.e., that the promised Messiah had finally come and that his

coming involves a new relationship between humanity and God. It's as if Jesus appears in order to confirm Stephen's analysis of what Jesus' life had meant, of what Jesus' life still means now.

We are all called to give witness to the risen Christ, to proclaim the kingdom that Jesus taught. This Sunday's reading, offered as we remember the liturgy of the Ascension and look forward to the celebration of Pentecost, serves to assure us that the Jesus we remember from the past is still in touch with us now.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

How/where do I experience Christ in glory?

What part does the presence of the risen Christ play in my spirituality?

Pentecost Sunday (ABC)

Acts of the Apostles 2:1–11

This Sunday's reading is like the reading for Ascension Day: it is a "constitutive" reading which gives the scriptural foundation for the feast that is being celebrated, and so it is read for this liturgical celebration in each of the three years of the lectionary cycle.

Luke begins his narrative by giving us its religious context. It was the Jewish feast of Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, when the Jews offered thanks for the wheat harvest, but also celebrated the gift of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai (and thus the formal religious establishment of God's people).

The apostles were all together when a great noise filled the