THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

First Reading Acts 1:1-11

Luke follows contemporary practice when at the beginning of his second volume (Acts) he echoes the close of his gospel. The introduc¬tion to Acts passes from a brief recapitulation of the gospel (vv. 1-2) to a summary of the conversation of Jesus with his apostles after his resurrection (vv. 3-80, and a description of the Ascension (vv. 9-11).

In 1:6-8 the question of the apostles and the answer of the risen Jesus provide an answer to questions that had been asked many times before Luke wrote. Just as the conception of Jesus, 'Son of the Most High,' was due to the coming of the Holy Spirit on Mary (Lk 1:35), so the inception of the mission of the Church is brought about by a coming of the Holy Spirit on the apostles. In v. 8 Luke offers the programme his story is to follow. The phrase 'to the ends of the earth' harks back to Isaiah 49:6, a prophecy of universal salvation. Rome, where the story will end (28:30-31), while not the end of the earth, is the centre of the Empire from which all roads lead to the end of the earth. In vv. 9-11 Luke describes the departure of Jesus. The cloud is the vehicle which transports Jesus into the presence of God. The cloud of ascen¬sion will be the vehicle on which he will come at his parousia (v. 11). In the Gospel (24:50-51) the ascension is placed at the close of one Easter day of appearances; it comes as a solemn finale. In Acts the ascension comes at the end of forty days and has something of the flavour of a farewell. (It goes without saying that we must avoid any impression that our feast of Ascension is, or ever was, meant to mark a first return of the risen One to his Father). The ascension marks the close of an era. Jesus'journey to God has been completed by his 'being

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taken up' into heaven. It likewise signals the beginning of a new era, that of the mission of the Church which is about to be inaugurated.

Luke sets out to show how Jesus continues to act and teach after his resurrection through the Holy Spirit and through the followers of Jesus who will be his 'witnesses' to the ends of the earth. They are the nucleus of his Church which is the continuation of his presence and power. They no longer experience Jesus among them in the same way as before when they walked and talked with him during his earthly ministry. He is no longer earthbound; yet, while sharing in the glory of his Father, he continues to guide and direct his community. His followers receive a promise and a mission. The same Jesus, now in the glorious presence of his Father, will continue to be with them through the Spirit - a power enabling them to become Christ's 'witnesses.' Through them the message of Jesus would reach out in ever-widening circles.

Second Reading Eph 1:17-23

Here ascension is viewed as the logical conclusion and completion of the resurrection. The passage must be viewed against the background of the letter as a whole. The letter was occasioned by controversy over the cosmic role of Christ. There were some who claimed that he should be classed among a host of beings, intermediaries between God and humankind (v. 21). The author formulated his own view in contrast. The meaning of the resurrection-ascension event is that God has raised Jesus above those nebulous powers to his due position as crown of creation. First-born of all creation by nature, and first to be born form the dead by resurrection, he is first in every way (see Coil: 15-18). But what interests the author is the consequences of this for Christians. The Father's exaltation of Christ is evidence of 'his power for us who believe.' If Christians are baptized into Christ, they have risen with him, and with him have been exalted into heaven, and with him glorified (Rom 8:30). In another sense the transformation into the glorious Christ is still to come; at least it is yet to be revealed (Col 3:4). The basis of the Christian hope in the ascension is that by it the Christ in whom we already abide is raised to the right hand of the Father and his power is at work in the Church.

Second Reading ad libitum Heb 9:24-28; 10:19-23

The Christiasn High Priest does not officiate in an earthly sanctuary; his rightful place is in heaven itself. There he appears, now and forever, before God on our behalf. Hebrews uses three images to express the

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work of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary: (1) ritual of the Day of Atonement, which reconciles God and people (v. 23); (2) appearance in the presence of God (vv. 25-26); and (3) 'intercession' (v. 25). All three images are combined in v. 24.

In 10:19-23 the 'sanctuary' is heaven, the focal point of union between God and humankind, and the goal of our pilgrimage toward salvation (12:22). The 'blood of Jesus' is a theological symbol of his saving work and its fruits (9:12, 22; 12:24). The 'curtain' which separated the Holy of Holies from the outer sanctuary (9:3) is here, as in 6:19, a symbol of the barrier which separates heaven from what is without. 'Through his flesh' is to be attached to 'way': it is precisely because he has taken on our flesh and blood that Christ has been enabled to become the way that leads his brothers and sisters into heaven. V.22 gives the qualification for drawing near to God: a sinless heart and fulness of faith. 'Sprinkled' and 'washed' offer an allusion to baptism. There are two exhortations: 'let us approach'; 'let us hold fast'. The first follows on the fact of being enabled to approach (v.19). The holding fast is based on firm hope in God's faithful promise.

Gospel Lk 24:46-53

At the close of his gospel, Luke (24:44-49) summarizes the last commission of Jesus to his disciples and repeats it the beginning of Acts. More pointedly, the outline and words of this passage echo the apostolic kerygma of Acts. Jesus first (v 44) recalls the occasions on which he had warned them that he, in fulfilment of the will of God enshrined in the Scriptures, would have to suffer, die, and rise again. 'While I was still with you': his relations with the disciples are not what they were before his glorification.

Then (vv. 45-48) he proceeds to give them a new understanding of the Old Testament, an insight that will enable them to see how and where it 'bears witness to him' (see John 5:39). The reinterpretation of the Old Testament is a basic element of the primitive kerygma: the dawning of the age of fulfilment (v. 44; see Acts 2:16; 3:18; 3:24); the suffering of the Messiah and his resurrection on the third day (Acts 2:23-24; 3:13-15; 4:10). The kerygma always includes the proclama¬tion of repentance and forgiveness of sins, a proclamation to human¬kind - the universalist note is very much at home in Luke (Acts 2:38¬39; 3:19-20; 4:12). These are the points which Paul developed in his discourse at Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:26-41). The message of salvation will go forth from Jerusalem, preached by the apostles who are witnesses of the fulfilment of the prophecies (see Acts 1:8), men

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who had seen the risen Christ and who can attest that this Lord is the same Jesus with whom they had lived (Acts 1:21; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39-42; 13:31). The disciples are convincing witnesses and effica¬cious missionaries because they have seen the Lord and have believed in him; all who would, effectively, bear witness to Christ must have encountered him in personal and living faith.

Today, when the call of the apostolate is urgent and the role of witness is seen as the obligation of every Christian, we are more keenly aware that religion is not the acceptance of a body of doctrine or the adherence to a code of law, but attachment to a Person. Knowledge of Christ, in the biblical sense of acceptance and commitment, is the essence of Christian life; it is obviously the first requirement of an apostle.

Luke has undoubtedly given the impression that all the events of chapter 24 had taken place on Easter day (see vv. 1, 13, 22, 29, 44,40). This arrangement is editorial and the passage vv. 44-53 is a telescoped version of Acts 1:3-14. Though it is true that Jesus did ascend to his Father on Easter day (see John 20:17), it is clear that the Ascension in question here is the same as that of Acts - the final, visible departure of Christ forty days (Acts 1:3) after the resurrection. 'As far as Bethany' (v. 50): in Acts the place of ascension is 'the mount called Olivet' (Acts 1:12) - Bethany lies on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. With his hands raised in blessing (see Lev 9:22; Sir 50:22) Jesus parted from them (Acts 1:9). The joy of the disciples (v. 52) at the moment of parting, though at first sight surprising, is explained by their realization that 'the Lord has risen indeed' (v. 34). And they have his assurance that, very soon, they will be 'clothed with power from on high' (v. 49). Their minds have been opened to understand the Scriptures: now they have grasped the plan of God and they realize that Christ, their Lord, has triumphed. Thankfully, they hasten to glorify God in his temple. Luke has closed his gospel as he began it, in the Temple; yet all is changed, changed utterly! He has shown the 'time of Israel' yielding to the 'time of Christ.' And now, about to begin his account of the word of salvation going forth from Jerusalem to 'the end of the earth' (Acts 1:8), he leaves us at the beginning of a new age, the 'time of the Church.'