

Commentary on the Gospel: The Ascension

Gospel for the Ascension of the Lord (Cycle C) and commentary.

Gospel (*Lk 24:46-53*)

And [Jesus] said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city,

until you are clothed with power from on high.”

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.

Commentary

These words of Jesus, with which the Gospel according to Luke ends, sum up the great themes that form the heart of our faith and the Church’s mission: Christ died and conquered death, so that all might be saved. The “exodus” of which Jesus spoke to Moses and Elijah in the Transfiguration (cf. *Lk* 9:31), has been fulfilled in Jerusalem. From

there he sends out the Apostles, clothed with the power of “the promise of my Father upon you,” that is, the Holy Spirit, to preach throughout the whole world repentance and forgiveness of sins (vv. 46-49).

They were “witnesses of these things” (v. 48), since they had seen the Crucifixion and the Risen Jesus, and hence were able to understand the Scriptures that speak about the mystery of Christ, about the Son of God made man, who gave his life for us and rose, forever alive and a guarantee of our eternal life. “This is the witness – given not only with words but also through daily life – the witness that every Sunday should come out of our churches to enter during the week into houses, offices, schools, places for meeting and for leisure, hospitals, prisons, homes for the elderly, places crowded with immigrants, the outskirts of cities...

We must bear this witness every week: Christ is with us; Jesus rose to heaven, he is with us. Christ lives!”[1]

“Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy” (vv. 50-52). The Apostles’ reaction is surprising. The most reasonable thing would have been for them to be disconcerted and dejected, because Jesus was departing definitively from them and they were to remain alone in the world, with a task that completely transcended their own strength and abilities, while having to confront the same difficulties the Master had encountered. Besides, if all farewells are painful, Jesus’ definitive departure from this world should have filled them with sadness. How

is it possible that “they returned to Jerusalem with great joy” (v. 52)?

Benedict XVI calls our attention to the fact that if the disciples return joyful it is because “the disciples do not feel abandoned. They do not consider Jesus to have disappeared far away in an inaccessible heaven. They are obviously convinced of a new presence of Jesus ... The joy of the disciples after the ‘Ascension’ does not mean departure into a remote region of the cosmos, but rather the continuing closeness that the disciples experience so strongly that it becomes a source of lasting joy.”[2]

At the same time, they are joyful because they are aware of the great good that the Ascension brings to all mankind, which, in Christ, is called to share in divine glory. Saint Leo the Great says: “when the Lord entered the heights of heaven, not only did

the Apostles experience no sadness, but they were filled with great joy. And truly great and unspeakable was the cause of their joy, when in the sight of the holy multitude, above the dignity of all heavenly creatures, the Nature of mankind went up, to pass above the angels' ranks and to rise beyond the archangels' heights, and to have Its uplifting limited by no elevation until, received to sit with the Eternal Father, It should be associated on the throne with His glory, to Whose Nature It was united in the Son.”^[3] With the Ascension of Jesus our hope that we too will share in the fullness of divine life in celestial glory is nourished.

[1] Pope Francis, *Regina coeli*, Sunday May 8, 2016.

[2] Joseph Ratzinger - Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth. Holy Week from the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, Ignatius Press 2011, p. 281.

[3] Saint Leo the Great, *Sermo 1 de ascensione Domini*, 4.

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