

SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION

Our scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Luke 24:46–53. These verses conclude the Gospel of Luke and prepare for the mission of the Church. There are several points worthy of our reflection as we hear our Lord’s final words to the disciples.

It’s helpful to read a very verses before this Sunday’s Gospel so as to place the Ascension in context. Before our Lord ascended into heaven, He first opened the minds of the disciples to the meaning of His words and to the scriptures (see Lk 24:44-45). It is significant also that this appearance of Jesus to the disciples occurs in the midst of a meal where Jesus asked for something to eat (see Lk 24:41–43). The combination of Jesus’ words, the scriptures, a meal and mention of the breaking of the bread (see Lk 24:35) are all elements of our current Eucharistic Liturgy when we celebrate both the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The mention of fish in this context has generated moderate speculation and may be an allusion to the Feeding of the Five Thousand in Lk 9:13-16 which was also a Eucharistic scene.

Luke is most likely giving us an insight into what should be happening every time we gather to experience the Risen Lord in our community prayer on the day of Resurrection: He is present both in the Word of God proclaimed in the Scriptures and in the Eucharist celebrated on the altar. The experience of Jesus in the context of the Mass is one of the significant themes of Luke’s Gospel because the evangelist is trying to encourage his community to find Jesus in the present rather than only remembering Him as He was during His earthly ministry or focusing on how He will be when He comes again. Luke wants his community and us to realize that we can hear the Lord speaking to us today every time the scriptures are proclaimed, and we can experience deep communion with Jesus today every time we break bread in the Eucharist.

It is important to note that the disciples’ could not grasp the meaning of scripture on their own. Rather, the Lord had to interpret the scriptures for them through the lens of His death and resurrection before they could have a proper understanding of God’s revelation in the writings of the Law and the Prophets (Old Testament). With Jesus’ instruction, the disciples are now able to see how various prophecies were fulfilled in Him.

As disciples, we are reminded to always read the Old Testament and the New Testament through the interpretative lens of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. Such a clearly defined perspective protects us from taking Jesus’ words out of context or interpreting other passages of scripture in ways that are not divinely intended. This is an important message for us because it helps us properly apply the scriptures and teachings of the Lord for our lives.

How can the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus change the way you will read or understand your favorite passages of scripture?

What other principles other than the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus can people be tempted to use when interpreting scripture?

What is the danger of reading scripture through the lens of only one part of Jesus’ Paschal Mystery — that is through His suffering, death, or resurrection only— but not all of it?

What helps you to recognize and experience the presence of Jesus in the Liturgy of the Word?

What can a faith community do to help open the minds of people to better understand the meaning of the scriptures for their lives?

How do you think the disciples were trying to interpret the scriptures and Jesus' words before our Lord opened their minds to the correct way?

How do you know when someone is quoting or interpreting scripture in a way that goes against the divine intention?

After the Risen Lord opened their minds to the meaning of the Scriptures, He then simply says to them, "You are my witnesses". This is a very powerful statement for three reasons. First, we usually understand "witness" in a passive sense meaning that a witness is someone who sees something occur. While it is true that the disciples did see Jesus teach, heal, lead, forgive, suffer, die and rise, there is more to being a disciple than just being a spectator. Being a witness means communicating to others the reality of Jesus that we ourselves have been blessed to experience. It is an active role, not a passive role. Eyewitnesses must become Ministers of the Word for others (see Lk 1:2) and not just reporters of a past event.

Second, being a witness of Jesus means that we live out the same radical love and trust in our lives that Jesus demonstrated in His passion, death, and resurrection. The word for "witnesses" in Greek is *martyres* that gives us the English word "Martyr". Indeed, Martyrs are people who witnessed their faith in Jesus' death and resurrection at the cost of their own lives. Virtually all of the disciples who encountered the Lord in this scripture passage were put to death because of their faith. By remaining faithful and being united to Jesus in a death like His, they manifested their hope to share in His resurrection as well. We may not be called to physically die because of our faith but there are lots of ways in which we are called to be courageous witnesses of Jesus' death and resurrection each day.

Third, Jesus tells His disciples that they are to be witnesses and that their witnessing is to have a practical effect in other people's lives. Namely, Jesus is commissioning the disciples and sending them forth with the great task of proclaiming the Gospel to all nations so that the nations might repent and share in the forgiveness of sins. The message of Jesus has a purpose and that purpose is to change our lives (repentance) and lead us to holiness (forgiveness of sins). This great commission is not an invention of early Christians as some contemporary adversaries of the Church claim. This great commission of Jesus is actually part of the fulfillment of scripture just as much as the death and resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of scripture (see Is 52:13–53:12 foretells the suffering messiah; Ho 6:2 foretells the resurrection on the third day; Is 49:6 foretells the message of salvation and repentance to all nations). With Jesus' commission, the early Christians understood that being a disciple required three things: that they share with others what they themselves had received, that they live out in their own lives the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection, and that they show the world what a life conformed to Christ looks like so that

others can be inspired and encouraged to become disciples as well. Witnessing, then had the purpose of effectively leading others to Christ through repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

How does this understanding of being a witness change your reading of this passage?

How can people witness the death and resurrection of Jesus in daily life? Who has been for you a witness of Jesus' death and resurrection?

What would it mean for you to move from being an eyewitness to becoming a Minister of the Word?

If Jesus told you in your prayer that He wanted you to be His witness, what would be your first thought?

When have you been inspired to grow deeper in your faith life because of another person's lived example of faith?

Why do you think Luke connects the forgiveness of sins to the experience of repentance (change of life) and what does that require of you?

Jesus goes on to instruct the disciples to remain in Jerusalem until He sends the promise of His Father and they are clothed with power from on high. It is important to note that these are our Lord's last words in the Gospel of Luke and as such they are an enduring instruction to all disciples. In using the phrase "Promise of my Father" (repeated in Acts 1:4), Jesus is calling to mind the great fidelity of Abraham who trusted that God's promises to him would be fulfilled (see Acts 2:39, 3:24–26, 13:32, 26:6 for additional texts that speak about God's promise being fulfilled). Indeed, God's promises are fulfilled in the sending of the Holy Spirit for whom the disciples were taught to pray (see Lk 11:13).

The phrase "power from on high" is reminiscent of the words of the Archangel Gabriel spoke to Mary in Lk 1:35 when he announced to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." It is no accident that Luke uses the same phrase to describe both the creative power of the Holy Spirit, which overshadowed Mary to become the Mother of the Lord, and the creative power of the Holy Spirit overshadowing the disciples to become Witnesses of the Lord as the Church (see Acts 1:8). It is the same Spirit who brings about the birth of Jesus and the same Spirit who brings about the birth of the Church! Thus, God's promises are being fulfilled not only in the sending of Jesus but also in the mission of the Church — that's us! We saw the powerful work the Spirit could do in the life and ministry of Jesus (see Lk 4:14). To sustain us in our mission, the Spirit continues to mediate the Divine Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist at every Mass. Indeed, God continues to fulfill His promises to us and through us to the world through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

What do you think is the primary work of the Spirit in the Church and world today?

What do you think the disciples thought when they realized that they were going to receive the same Spirit that overshadowed Mary and empowered Jesus in His life and ministry?

God can do great things with those who willingly, eagerly, and openly receive the Lord's

Spirit (for example, Mary, Jesus, the Eucharist). What makes it difficult for you to be receptive to and cooperative with the Holy Spirit in your life?

When we think about the promises of God, we usually focus on how those promises affect us personally but this passage indicates that the promise of God will be fulfilled for the world through us. How might God use your life to fulfill His promise to the world?

At the end of this passage we are told that Jesus blessed them and departed from them. With that, the disciples were filled with joy and blessed God (see Lk 24:50–53). Christians today have little idea of how problematic the Ascension of Jesus was to disciples of the first century. They missed the Lord and for them the Ascension was sometimes perceived as bad news rather than a cause for joyful celebration. In order to understand why it was a reason for joy, it is necessary to remember that as long as Jesus was physically with the disciples they allowed Him to address challenges, to respond to questions, to help the suffering, the poor, the cripple. In short, the disciples didn't do much themselves or show much initiative because Jesus was with them.

There came a moment when the disciples had to become active agents in fulfilling the mission of the Church. The Ascension of Jesus does not mean the Lord's absence from the life of the Church; rather, Jesus' enthronement in heaven means that our Lord continues to direct the work of the Church through the Holy Spirit. With the eyes of faith, Jesus is actually more present to the Church in His ascended glory than He was in His early ministry and that is good news! The Holy Spirit unites the Head (Jesus) with the Body (the Church) so that the fulness of Jesus Christ is manifested in the Ascension.

When Catherine of Siena in the fourteenth century used the image of the bridge to describe our journey to God, she remembered the passage of Jn. 12:32, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself," which she understood as a reference to the Ascension as the ultimate effort of Christ to bring to the Father what He has won with His sacrifice.¹

It is also good news for us that Jesus has confidence that we are capable of being His instruments through which He can continue to carry out His mission. Sometimes Jesus knows our capabilities better than we do. Sometimes, too, we only discover our capabilities when we are required to fulfill a challenging mission and we experience the Lord working through us. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit and our Lord's enthronement at the right hand of the Father in glory, we now become His mystical body on earth to carry on His ministry of salvation for all nations.

*How are you an active agent in carrying out the mission Jesus entrusted to the Church?
In what ways do you feel ill equipped to fulfill our Lord's commission? How do you respond to those feelings of inadequacy?*

How do you seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in your life? How do you know when the Holy Spirit is inspiring you in a particular way?

¹ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogos n. 26*, BAC, Madrid, 2011, p. 100.

Sometimes when we hear of tragic situations we can find ourselves praying, “Lord, do something!” and if we listen carefully in our prayer then we may hear the response, “I did do something, I created you.” How does this dialogue of prayer challenge you to be a witness of Jesus in the world today?

What can the Church do to help disciples discover and fulfill their roles in fulfilling the mission Jesus wants to accomplish through us?