

THE EMMAUS SERIES

The Ascension, Year C

Acts 1:1-11

Hebrews 9: 24-28, 10: 19-23

Luke 24:46-53

This same Jesus will come back

In today's liturgy we have two readings from Luke, the conclusion of his gospel, and the opening passage of the Acts of the Apostles. Comparing them can give us an insight into how Luke tells the story of the origins of our faith. In the concluding passage of the gospel, Jesus, on the evening of his resurrection day, 'withdraws' from the eleven and their fellow disciples, and 'is carried up to heaven'. John's gospel paints a similar picture – the Risen Lord, we recall, tells Mary Magdalene on the morning of his resurrection, 'Do not cling to me, because I have not yet ascended to my Father'. In fact, we do not find in any of the gospels – Luke's included – the sequence in Acts with which we are so familiar: Resurrection; Ascension (after 40 days); Pentecost (after 50 days).

Skilful teacher that he is, Luke wants, in these two accounts, to spell out for his readers different aspects of the Saviour's Paschal Mystery. The gospel account is, before all else, an affirmation of the faith and worship given by the apostles to the Risen Lord: brother of us all in his wounded humanity, whose sufferings are to be recognised as according to the preordained plan of God, sending the disciples to give witness to the whole world, promising his Spirit, blessing them and receiving their worship, now gone to the Father and no longer with them as before.

The gospel is the story of the Saviour. Luke's second volume, Acts of the Apostles is the story of the Church's beginnings. So Luke tells this second story in a way that emphasises the sure foundations of the Church's faith – what the disciples learned from the Risen Lord, who 'for forty days, continued to appear to them and tell them about the kingdom of God'. As we have seen in the past weeks, all the gospels imply this learning process, making reference to the initial doubts and hesitations of the disciples in their encounters with Christ after his resurrection. Of course, Luke may have his own factual basis for his account – there was certainly a large influx of pilgrims to Jerusalem on the feast of Pentecost, 50 days after the Passover; on the other hand, as we know, 40 is used by biblical writers, as a round number. Through the gift of the Christ's own Spirit at Pentecost this foundation laid by the Saviour will shape the Church's mission: 'not many days from now you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit'. Luke, in Acts, tells the story of the early Church as the work of the Holy Spirit.

Luke's presentation of the Ascension brings out something else of great moment in the life of the pilgrim Church. 'I am going away', Jesus had said to the disciples more than once. Gone to the right hand of the Father he will be present in a new and more intimate way: 'I am with you always; yes, to the end of time' (Matthew 28). In one of his homilies Pope Leo the Great wrote: 'The visible presence of our Redeemer passed over into the sacraments. For, in a mysterious way, once he had returned to the glory of his Father's majesty, the Son of Man began to be more present'.

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