

The Ascension of the Lord, Year A

GOSPEL

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The eleven disciples set out for Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had arranged to meet them. When they saw him they fell down before him, though some hesitated. Jesus came up and spoke to them. He said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.'

(Matthew 28:16-20)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The Ascension of Jesus is described only in the Book of Acts (1:2-11), although there is a shorter version in Luke's Gospel. There are also allusions to the event elsewhere in the New Testament (such as John 6:62, or Ephesians 4:8-10).
- In Matthew's Gospel, many of the important moments of Jesus' life are located on mountaintops: his temptation, his transfiguration, the great teaching of the Sermon on the Mount and now this final instruction to his disciples. In this way, Matthew draws parallels with Moses, the great leader and lawgiver who encountered God on the mountaintop.
- Matthew shows Jesus as fulfilling and extending the teaching of Moses. Whereas the law had been for the people of Israel, Jesus sends his disciples to all nations; whereas the Jewish people had faith in the name of God, YHWH , Jesus sends his disciples to baptise in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The feast of the Ascension celebrates the physical separation of Jesus from the human story, but this text promises his continual presence 'to the end of time'. After three years of living, working and praying with the disciples, Jesus commissions them to continue his work in the world. This is a difficult challenge for some of the disciples who, although prepared to go to the appointed place, still hesitate! Despite their misgivings and fragile faith, he sends them out to all nations. Jesus has been given the authority that was once the exclusive domain of the God of Israel; Jesus has become the presence of the living God, and his presence will continue with his disciples through the Holy Spirit.

- Despite this affirmation from Jesus of his continued presence, the disciples at this point had no idea what would happen next. Talk for a time of how they may have felt. What did happen next?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'Know that I am with you always.' In what ways do you sense the presence of Jesus in yourself, in the Church and in the world?
- 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.' How do you see your role in this great work of the Church? How can you bring the life of Christ to others?
- As you near the completion of your time with the RCIA, recall what it was that first drew you to wanting to become a disciple of Jesus. Share your reflections on how you now feel about your decision. Reflect on your way forward in the life of faith.
- Give witness to your faith this week by living the way of Christ: do not judge others, act with humility, respond to the needs of others, pray often.
- 'Know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.' Memorise this verse to help you in times of doubt or distress.

SHARING THE TRADITION

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

The celebration of the Ascension as a particular feast day developed in the vicinity of Antioch around AD 380. The first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles notes that Jesus appeared among his disciples for forty days after the resurrection (Acts 1:3). It then goes on to describe Jesus being taken up into heaven (Acts 1:9). The juxtaposition of these two verses probably gave rise to this feast being celebrated forty days after Easter. Forty days after Easter falls on a Thursday, and in the past this feast was known as 'Ascension Thursday' and was a holy day of obligation. In more recent times, the celebration has been moved to the Sunday before Pentecost.

- You could talk about holy days of obligation and what they mean in the tradition of the Church. There may be other obligations of the faith that the newly baptised have not yet encountered. Make sure they are equipped to move beyond the RCIA and into full participation in the Church.
- This text from Matthew is often taken as the foundational text of mission organisations who work in crosscultural contexts, such as St Columban's Mission Society or Catholic Mission. You could speak about the work of such groups and why the missionary activity of the Church is still so important.
- Emphasise that *all* the baptised are called to participate in the missionary work of the Church, in whatever sphere we work.

SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

The word *apostle* comes from the Greek word meaning 'one who is sent out'. Jesus sends his apostles out to continue to preach the Good News to the entire world. This recalls for us the 'sending out' that occurs at the end of our Mass: 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.' We, too, are sent to bring the truth of the Gospel into our daily actions and decisions and thus give witness to the faith we profess.

LIVING THE WORD

Practical ideas for group leaders to employ in connecting Scripture and daily life, with suggestions for music and environment

- In what ways does your community support and engage in the missionary work of the Church? Are there ways the newly baptised can become involved in this work?
- The Book of the Gospels is a suitable focus for prayer. Use or adapt one of the prefaces for the Ascension. You could use the psalm of praise from today's liturgy. Pray for each other. A suitable song could be 'Lord, you give the Great Commission' (GA 313) or 'Take Christ to the world' (GA 369). Conclude with the blessing in RCIA at

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