

Ascension Day 2020

Daniel 7:13-14. Acts 1:1-11. Matthew 28:16-20.

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that as we believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell, who lives and reigns with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen.

Our portion of the gospel for today is very short. But, it is also very concentrated. A lot of issues are packed into a small space! For example, there are eleven disciples not twelve. Judas Iscariot had committed suicide and it seems another had not been appointed yet to take his place. The lot fell to Mathias (Acts 1:26), whom the others chose after they had returned down the hill to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives after Jesus Ascension. Further, though the disciples fell down to worship the Risen Lord, it seems that some doubted (or did they)? Then comes Jesus' remarkable self-declaration of Divine Authority, and a commission to go out and make disciples of all (the) nations. Lastly, He promises to be with them always, to the close of the age. But, how so, if He is clearly ascending away from them?

If you would like to send me your answers to one or two of these mysteries, please feel free to take a day or so to think about them.

I mentioned that in verse 17 our translations say 'but some doubted'. Here in this passage, worship (or obeisance, bowing down to Jesus) is linked with doubt. It's a fact that some people go through the motions of worship, possibly doing rituals such as crossing oneself, or kneeling at the altar, or even a priest waving their hands over the altar. Worship, though, really means proclaiming someone's worth. But actions performed in worship carry a lot of cultural baggage. They don't tell you what a person is honestly thinking whilst they are doing them. In many cultures people would prostrate themselves before their superiors. Moslems still do this in their prayers, as do other religions. If everybody in the group did it except one person, the latter would literally stand out in the crowd. They would feel very conspicuous.

Commentators have tried to figure out what the precise interpretation of 'some doubted' is, so as to translate the Greek accurately. Suffice it to say that there is no definitive explanation. It could mean: some of the eleven, all of the eleven, or none of the eleven (because it refers back to the Jewish leaders who had doubted the reality of Christ's resurrection appearances). Take your pick!

However, there is one more possibility, namely that the disciples prostrated themselves before the Risen Lord because they thought He was going to punish them for their none belief and cowardice. It would have been a relief to hear Him say that He was commissioning them to disciple the nations, and baptise them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and to teach them the observance of Christ's commands. It would also be a relief, if not a bit daunting, to be told that He would be with them, in effect inspiring and monitoring their efforts.

Today we celebrate the Solemnity or Feast of the Ascension, the fortieth day after Easter, and ten days before Pentecost. Some have pushed it forward to the Sunday, 6th after Easter, but this breaks with the idea of 40 being an important religious number. I believe Jesus would have been more aware than any of us of the true meaning of the symbolic times and seasons He fulfilled in His ministry. Forty years appears time and again in the Bible. Moses spent 40 days with God on Mount Sinai, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness fasting, and so forth. So, I shall be celebrating Mass today, Thursday, and holding you all before God in worship and prayer. Like the disciples I shall kneel at various points, and I shall confess my sins, and I shall be conscious of the fact of Jesus' presence in the Eucharist. I shall praise and worship Him with countless others from among the nations, and from His own earthly nation, the Jewish people, who bow the knee in humility and thanksgiving to Him for His power over death,... over my death, over your death, and beyond it into everlasting life.

O clap your hands together all ye peoples: O cry aloud unto God with shouts of joy. Psalm 47.

Here is a link to a short video clip of the Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvoNO-L-PfU>