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When I was in college we celebrated a Holy Thursday liturgy that culminated in a fantastic light show on the ceiling. At first it was subtle, and then as vocal music yielded to instrumental, we all began to notice the intertwining, dancing lights above our heads. It must have lasted almost a minute when suddenly a voice boomed out “Why are you standing there looking up? Go tell the world what you have seen!” It was a fabulous “gotcha” moment — and the message stayed with us.

Getting down to the mission is surely part of the message here; the scene reminds us of the transfiguration when Jesus told Peter that they didn’t have time to camp out on the mountain, there was work to do and much to learn. Nevertheless, we could imagine an alternative scene at the end of the Ascension story. What if one or two of the disciples had the nerve to answer back when the angels spoke? (We can tell by their outfits that they were both angels.) Speaking back is not out of the question. After all, at the very beginning of the Gospel of Luke, Mary questioned an angel — as did Zachariah with less positive results.

A Peter or Martha might have said, “He told us it’s not yet time! We’re supposed to stick around for whatever’s coming next.” Others might have gotten the courage to chime in: “Why are we looking up? Because we don’t know what’s about to happen!” “Where else are we supposed to look? We need to see beyond this spot

where our feet are sinking in the mud of fear and confusion. All around us we see nothing but signs of all that went wrong in the past few weeks.”

If there were anyone on the side of the angels, it might have been Mary Magdalene. Having understood that she couldn't cling to Jesus, she could have encouraged the rest: “Come on guys, I know you can't just take it from me, but he said he would remain with us ... Don't you get it? This is just like when Elijah went off in the fiery chariot ... he left Elisha with a double dose of his spirit. So, for once, let's try doing what he told us!”

While that's imaginary, Luke's story does portray the tension between looking heavenward and getting down to earth. Thinking about it, we can well imagine how unprepared those disciples must have felt for their mission.

The Letter to the Ephesians offers a description of the gifts the disciples needed to move forward. In today's selection from that letter we hear the prayer “May the God of our Lord ... give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of him. May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened that you may know the hope that belongs to his call ... the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe.” What a prayer for semi-willing, mostly confused disciples!

That prayer begins by grounding us in our faith, reminding us that the will of God the Father, “our Lord,” and the Spirit is always for our good. When it asks for a “Spirit of wisdom and revelation,” it opens us to the Spirit that gives us the ability to read the signs of the times, to recognize how God is luring us forward through the people and events of our days. To pray that “the eyes of our hearts be enlightened” pleads for a God-sized vision, for hope that will go further than all our imaginations put together.

We can celebrate the Ascension as an invitation to imagination that leads us to ask for such a blessing. We are invited to stand with the disciples who heard the promise, who knew they wouldn't see Jesus anymore but who were still charged with carrying on his mission. Like them, we must face the very real dispiriting events of our times, the circumstances that cannot and should not be ignored. We may share their desire to simply stand, looking heavenward for a solution, but we will also hear angels or prophets who remind us that prayer is only one part of the equation.

If we have the audacity and courage to pray for the blessings of wisdom, revelation, knowledge of God, enlightened hearts and Christian hope, we will be impelled to action. The really good news is that Christ has promised that as we go to the ends of

the earth, he will be with us until the end of the ages.

## **ACTS 1:1-11**

The Acts of the Apostles — “Volume II” of Luke’s work on Jesus and the progress of his mission — begins by saying that Luke’s Gospel dealt with all that Jesus began to do and to teach. The opening line of Mark’s Gospel is “The beginning of the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (NRSV) . It seems that Luke, like Mark, wanted to emphasize that Jesus’ work had only just begun; his plan had always been to leave it in the hands of his followers.

The New American Bible translation of Acts 1:1-11 indicates that Jesus gave his disciples “instructions.” That word can also be translated to indicate that he gave them commands or a commission. Luke’s implication is that by instructing them, Jesus was not simply teaching but actually handing over his teaching ministry. Close attention to Luke’s description implies that Jesus commissioned the apostles through the Holy Spirit and that he also met with them in person. That indicates that even before Pentecost they had begun to be familiar with the Holy Spirit’s action among them, helping them understand all that Jesus had taught. When it came to Jesus’ resurrected presence among them, the word Luke used to say he was “meeting” or “gathered” with them hints strongly that they were at table. Thus, the conversation about the kingdom and the command to remain in Jerusalem probably took place in a eucharistic setting. (See the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, “Acts.”)

In what might seem like a diversion, the disciples ask Jesus if this is the end-time, the culmination of his work which they envision as the restoration of the kingdom of Israel. Jesus’ response picks up on the three dimensions of their question. First, he says that God’s activity in the world doesn’t fit their timetables, it’s not a day or hour that fits an agenda, not even a season of grace that they can predict. Like the kingdom of God that is among them, the fulfillment is in process. Secondly, Jesus is handing his mission on to them and with the help of the Holy Spirit they will carry it forward. Thirdly, his mission is broader than Israel; they will go forth from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

The final part of today’s reading describes Jesus’ ascension, although not with great detail. Here as in other events from the Gospels, our popular images are probably formed more by religious art than by Scripture itself. Luke tells us of no mountain, but simply says that as Jesus finished speaking, they looked on and saw him lifted

up. For people versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, more important than the setting was the fact that the disciples saw Jesus go out of sight. The scene replicates the time when Elijah was taken up after promising that if Elisha saw it happen, he would receive a double portion of Elijah's spirit.

One thing we might take away from this reading is how consistently Luke wove the action of the Holy Spirit through the whole story. Even as Jesus was appearing among them, the disciples were learning from the Holy Spirit. They were not to leave the area until they were immersed (baptized) in the Spirit. Finally, their preaching would be under the power of the Holy Spirit, and their seeing Jesus disappear from their midst was symbolic of his bequeathing his Spirit to them.

### **EPHESIANS 1:17-23**

As Jesus' disciples look heavenward seeking a blessing, they could hardly do better than to ask for what this selection from Ephesians prays. "Paul," the name under which the author is writing, begins by asking that the Spirit infuse us with the wisdom and revelation that bring knowledge of him. Those qualities could be synonyms with slightly different emphases.

Wisdom is, first of all, the fruit of the religious tradition, the knowledge of God that has been passed down through the ages and honed by experience. Solomon exemplified the Hebrew ideal of wisdom with his spirit of discernment. He exhibited wisdom in famous judgments but its origin was in his very request that God bless him with it, a sign that his most basic desire was to act in God's name. Wisdom can be understood as a consistent desire to know God's will by seeing more than one's own point of view, the attitude essential for learning from revelation. Revelation can be an intuition, the inspiration of the Spirit given to an individual. But private revelation is dangerously susceptible to self-deception. Thus, a spirit of revelation also looks to the tradition and the prophets who proclaim God's judgment or perspective about concrete situations. Taken together, the gifts of wisdom and revelation represent humble searching for the God who is greater than anything we can imagine.

This is why the blessing asks that the "eyes of your hearts be enlightened." Augustine taught that the human heart is created with a desire for God, but we are prone to falling for cheap substitutes. This part of the blessing prays that our heart's desire will continually grow, that our hopes can become God-sized.

The blessings Paul asks for here spring from the reality of what today's celebration of the ascension says about Christ. The ascension presents one of many images of Christ's glorification and union with God. The breadth of what this blessing asks is based on what it goes on to say about Christ. He is risen, he dwells with God and reigns over every created thing. His victory means that all creation is destined toward him. Paul said all things are under Christ's feet to be brought to fulfillment in him. Teilhard de Chardin put it this way: "Through the incarnation God descended into nature in order to super-animate and take it back to him" (*Mysticism of Science*).

The beginning and the end of this blessing ask for the same thing. In the beginning, it is the knowledge of God that comes from the discernment of an open heart. At the end, it is knowing the richness of the one who "fills all things in every way." In both cases, the blessing asks that the community be brought into union with God through Christ.

## **MATTHEW 28:16-20**

It's only when we combine the accounts from Acts and Matthew that we get the picture of Jesus ascending from a mountain: Matthew has the mountain and Acts tells of the ascension. We can rest assured that our evangelists were anything but advocates of "just the facts." Although Matthew mentions that Jesus had arranged for the meeting on the mountain; he doesn't tell us when or why or even which mountain.

Unlike Luke who has the disciples wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Spirit, Matthew presents Jesus' final moments with the disciples in Galilee, just where the women told the disciples they would find him. Matthew gives us various clues that the group on the mountain represented a broken church. They numbered eleven, reminding everyone of the betrayal by one of the intimate circle. When the disciples first spotted Jesus they responded by standing back in a mixture of worship and doubt. Those eleven disciples exhibited none of the enthusiasm shown by the women who rushed to the risen Lord, embraced and worshipped him (Matthew 28:9). The eleven in Matthew's depiction waited while Jesus approached them. After he assured them that God had vindicated him, he gave them the mission.

The Greek of Jesus' command "Go and make disciples" actually makes a verb out of the noun "disciple," literally saying "Go and disciple all the nations..." If making

disciples, baptizing and teaching might seem like the activity that fills a church building, “discipling” sounds more like heading out on a march. And if that’s the case, the last line of today’s Gospel makes it clear who is leading. The Gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus’ statement: “Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

Our readings for the feast of the Ascension of the Lord call us to action, but well-grounded action. There is much to do while disciples await the return of the Lord, and a good part of it is the activity involved in “discipling.” There is a time for looking up, for seeking the wisdom and revelation that will help us recognize the activity of Christ’s Spirit among us. But the contemplation that leads us to Christ will inevitably lead us into mission. Enlightened hearts are hearts on fire marching out to share the Spirit to the ends of the earth.

## **Planning: Ascension**

**By:** Lawrence Mick

In most dioceses in the U. S. and Canada, the celebration of the Ascension is transferred to this Sunday. If you are celebrating the Ascension on Thursday, these comments will still apply. In that case, the texts for the Seventh Sunday of Easter will be used today. See last week’s column for a few comments about the readings for that Sunday.

The Solemnity of the Ascension is a feast that is often misunderstood. The confusion arises if people take the story of the Ascension as an historical event that occurred precisely 40 days after Easter Sunday.

In the Christian Scriptures the Ascension is more of a theological reality than an historical date. While Luke describes the Ascension event weeks after Easter, John indicates that Christ was reunited with the Father on Easter Sunday; otherwise Christ could not have bestowed the Spirit on the Apostles on that first Easter evening. Even our Gospel today, taken from Matthew’s account, does not say that Jesus was taken up into heaven. Instead, his Gospel ends with Jesus promising: “I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

That line may be the best key to understanding the Ascension. Jesus does not leave us. The Ascension means that the risen Christ is now present in a different way but no less truly present. Christ is always with us, a presence we can depend upon and draw upon.

If this is true, then the celebration of the Eucharist does not mean that Christ suddenly comes into our midst during the eucharistic prayer, though I suspect many Catholics think that he does. Once again, he is simply present in a different way in the forms of bread and wine. But he has already been present in the assembly, in the presider, and in the word proclaimed, and he is present wherever we are every day of our lives.

So let Matthew's Gospel guide the preaching and music and prayers today. Celebrate the continuing presence of Christ in our midst as well as his glorification with the Father. Pray for the grace to recognize his presence in every aspect of our lives. Pray for those who show us the face of Christ. Pray that we might be the face of Christ to others. Pray that we have the courage and heart to bring his love to those in need. Pray that our world will come to recognize Christ's presence and his call to live in peace and charity. Pray for a deeper awareness of the Holy Spirit within us who makes us aware of Christ's presence in our hearts and our lives.

Consider singing James E. Moore's song, "I Will Be with You," during the preparation of the gifts today to echo the Gospel message.

## **Prayers: Ascension**

**By:** Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

We may think that those close to Jesus knew exactly what to do when he was no longer physically with them. They didn't. They saw how he had suffered, and they were afraid. We do not always know what to do either. Experiencing misgivings about the challenges of living as 21st century disciples may be a sign that we're on the right track.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you gave God's words to your followers: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you prayed for them as you left this world: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you called them and us to continue your work: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** My friends, let us pray for the courage to live in our challenging world.

**Minister** For the whole church: for the courage to live our faith when we experience doubt ... we pray,

- For those seeking to understand their mission as followers of Christ ... we pray,
- For peace throughout the world, especially for those forced to flee their country of origin for religious or political reasons ... we pray,
- For those who believe that living authentic Christian lives is easy or painless ... we pray,
- For those responsible for shaping the faith of others: for parents, pastors, catechists, and spiritual guides ... we pray,
- For doubting Christians who experience guilt or feel they have no one to support them ... we pray,
- For those preparing for marriage, for the newly married, and for those struggling in their marriage ... we pray,
- On this Memorial Day weekend, we pray for those who lost their lives in war, for those in danger today, and for their families and friends ... we pray,
- For all who are in any kind of need, especially the poor, the sick and the dying; and for those who have died ... *(names)* ... we pray,

**Presider** Gracious God, you are our light, our salvation, and the source of our courage. Make us strong disciples of Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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