

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD – YEAR A

The Feast of the Ascension of the Lord falls on the Thursday following the Sixth Sunday of Easter (the fortieth day of Easter). In some churches it is celebrated on the following Sunday.

First Reading Acts 1: 1–11

This week we return to the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles.

‘In the first book, O Theophilus ...’

The author – generally held to be Luke – provides a link between his gospel and the account of the life of the early Christian church which constitutes the Acts. The text is addressed to Theophilus, meaning ‘God lover’ in Greek. This may be an actual person, or it may represent all those who love God – that is, us. Luke summarises what he has done so far and introduces the material that will shape this second book.

Jesus presented himself alive ... appearing to them during forty days

Jesus remained on earth for 40 days after his resurrection. This is a significant number: the Israelites crossed the desert for 40 years, and Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days.

He ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem

In Luke’s mind, Jerusalem remains the centre of the new Church. It provides continuity between the history of Israel and the new Christian group.

‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’

The disciples were expecting an imminent change to the world order. But Jesus is at pains to show them that the coming of the Holy Spirit, which the Father had promised, makes this unnecessary.



‘You will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now’

If we add this suggestion to the 40 days, we easily reach 50, which is the length of time between Easter and Pentecost.

Two men stood by them in white robes

Their appearance reminds us of the two men in brilliant clothes at the tomb of Jesus asking an equally down-to-earth question: ‘Why do you seek the living among the dead?’ (Luke 24: 5).

Cameroon Ascension: Jesus MAFA

Gospel Matthew 28: 16–20

These four verses constitute the end of Matthew’s Gospel, recording the last recorded encounter between Jesus and his disciples, and Jesus’s last words to them. Matthew does not describe Jesus’s ascension.

The mountain in Galilee

Matthew does not name the mountain. However, it seems to be the same area as the places in Galilee mentioned earlier in the Gospel: the mountain in the Temptations (4: 8); the location of the Sermon on the Mount (5: 1); and the place where the Transfiguration happened (17: 1). Mountains have a symbolic value too: they are usually places that are difficult to access. By arranging to meet the disciples in Galilee, Jesus implicitly invites them to remember the beginning of their journey together.

The disciples’ reaction: worship and doubt

Their reactions are in line with the way they behaved during the resurrection appearances: some were overcome, others doubted. However, some scholars point out that the original Greek could imply not that there were two distinct groups of people (the worshippers and the doubters); but rather the phrase could mean ‘they worshipped but had doubts’.

The Great Commission

This is the name traditionally given to the three sayings of Jesus given below. It is a concise description of what the Early Church considered its role to be, and it acts by virtue of this commission. It is given to all disciples and to us, even if we, like them, sometimes have doubts or hesitations.

‘All authority has been given to me’

Jesus shows his authority over nature (the calming of the storm 4: 35–41) and over spirits (the Gerasene demoniac 5: 1–21). God is the source of his authority, as Jesus mentioned earlier in his ministry (11: 27).

‘Make disciples of all nations’

Whereas Matthew’s main audience is made up of Jewish people, Jesus now seeks to reach all nationalities and races.

‘Baptising and teaching them’

The disciples’ work is clearly defined. They are to do this in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Greek word for ‘baptise’ also means to immerse, not necessarily in water. Through their teaching of the Christian way of life, the disciples are to immerse their new followers in the presence of God, which is above them (the Father), beside them (the Son), and within them (the Spirit).

‘I am with you always’

The last words of Matthew’s Gospel take us back to its beginning. At the Annunciation (cf. 4th Sunday of Advent), Matthew records, ‘They shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us’ (1: 23).