

Ascension of the Lord, Year C

Acts 1:1-11

This book has been well described as the “Gospel of the Holy Spirit”. There is hardly a page in the Acts of the Apostles where we fail to read about the Spirit and the action by which He guides, directs and enlivens the life and work of the early Christian community. It is He who inspires the preaching of St. Peter, who strengthens the faith of the disciples, who confirms with His presence the calling of the Gentiles, who sends Saul and Barnabas to distant lands, where they will open new paths for the teaching of Jesus. In a word, His presence and doctrine are everywhere.¹

1In the first book, This refers to the Gospel of Luke which was written by the same author.¹ **Theophilus**, Like the gospel, it is dedicated to “the beloved of God” who possibly was an educated Christian of an upper-class background or he may be a fictitious person who is a symbol of “the beloved of God.”¹ **I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught** This is to be seen in the light of the mysteries of Christmas and Easter.⁴ (CCC 512) Note that doing must come before teaching!¹ In today’s readings, Luke speaks to us in both this selection from Acts and in the Gospel. In the Gospel Jesus speaks of “staying” and “returning,” but the language of Acts is all about action. It presents the embryonic Church beginning to realize: we’re here to stay and we’ve work to do! By the time Acts was written, the belief that the world would *soon* end and Jesus would return in glory had faded. So the young Church rolled up its sleeves to tackle the work Jesus gave them. There is no gloom or despondency in these lines, only confidence that this young community will carry on in Jesus’ name.¹⁴

2until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. This implies that what Jesus began to do in Luke he continues to do through his disciples in Acts.² The “apostles” refers to the Twelve minus Judas whose unique witness is prepared by both association with Jesus’ entire ministry and the Risen Lord’s 40-day instruction.⁵

3He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered, Christ’s body was glorified at the moment of his Resurrection as proved by the supernatural properties it subsequently and permanently enjoys but during the forty days when he eats and drinks familiarly with his disciples and teaches them about the kingdom, his glory remains veiled under the appearance of ordinary humanity.⁴ (CCC 659) **appearing to them during forty days** The Resurrection of Jesus is a miracle substantiated by many strands of evidence: his tomb was empty Easter morning, he presented himself alive to the apostles and other disciples that evening, he invited eyewitnesses to touch his risen body and examine his wounds, and he showed himself risen to more than 500 people at once.² For the ancient Israelites, the number 40 would symbolize a time of intense training and preparation for some great work. It recalls the forty years Israel spent in the desert preparing to enter the Promised Land and the 40 days Moses fasted on Mount Sinai when receiving the Ten Commandments. Most of all, these forty days parallel Jesus’ fast in the desert before he was led by the Spirit to begin proclaiming the kingdom in Galilee. In the same way he now spends forty days preparing the apostles to be led by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, when they will begin their ministry to the ends of the earth.⁶ **and speaking about the kingdom of God.**

4While meeting with them, he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for “the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; The promise of the Father is the Holy Spirit poured out through Christ.²

5for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” The baptism of John the Baptizer was aimed especially at conversion, at a change in the condition of a

soul, at being incorporated into the spiritual posterity of Abraham. Baptism with the Holy Spirit creates a new reality. It purifies from sin, brings about a change in the soul, and, above all, raises man to a participation in the very life of God.³

6When they had gathered together they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” The apostles still imagine that the work of the Christ is the political restoration of the Israelite monarchy.³ They hoped for a militant Messiah who would redeem Israel from the yoke of Roman oppression and rebuild the kingdom of David that had lain in ruins since the sixth century B.C. These political aspirations are given a spiritual fulfillment in Acts with the enthronement of Christ in heaven and the redemption of Israel and the Gentiles in the Church.²

7He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. Jesus affirms the coming of the kingdom but conceals the precise timing determined by the Father. His words imply that speculation is pointless.²

8But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses That is, to the dying and rising of Jesus. We get the English term “martyr” from this word. All the disciples in Acts witness to Christ with their words and life, while Stephen and James offer the testimony of a martyr’s death.² **in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** Jesus answers by foreshadowing the birth of the Church at Pentecost, not the restoration of the monarchy.³ This verse is really the outline of Acts for the author plans to tell the story of the growth of the Church, beginning in Jerusalem and spreading through Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth. In Luke’s Gospel, Jerusalem was the destination point of Jesus’ public life; here it is the departure point.¹

9When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, This is the last event, the last mystery of our Lord’s life on earth.¹ **and a cloud took him from their sight.** Many times throughout salvation history God has manifested his divine presence to Israel in the form of a cloud. It was in a cloud of glory that God’s presence filled the sanctuary in the desert, filled the temple in Jerusalem, and overshadowed Christ during his transfiguration. Now that same cloud of glory lifts Jesus up and brings him to heaven in triumphant glory.⁶

10While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them.

11They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.” The angels are referring to the Parousia—our Lord’s second coming—when he will judge the living and the dead.¹ The Church’s earliest creeds affirm that Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.² Christ’s return to the Father on a cloud also signals the fulfillment of an important prophecy from the OT. The prophet Daniel had a vision of a “son of man” figure who appeared victorious over his enemies and was carried to God *on the clouds of heaven* in order to be given a world-wide kingdom that would last forever.⁶ This promise of the angels is a hint to the disciples-- and to us(!)—that they must always be ready.¹⁴

Ephesians 1:17-23

This reading is an exultant hymn celebrating the role of Christ in God’s plan to save. The first paragraph is a greeting and a blessing and a prayer for all who hear it. It prays that all may receive understanding and wisdom regarding what God has accomplished for the salvation of the world through Jesus the Christ. And then it proceeds to recount that accomplishment. In the second paragraph we hear the writer celebrate the completion of Christ’s earthly ministry and his return to the glory of the Father’s right hand, surely explaining why the text was chosen for today’s feast. In the final paragraph we see Christ as ruler of the world, head of the church (his body),

and the fullness of the believers who fill every corner of the universe. It is a victory hymn as we approach the end of the Easter season. "The battle is over, the victory won."

Brothers and sisters:

17 *May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ,* The God who has revealed himself through Christ and to whom Jesus himself, as man, prays and asks for help. The same God as was described in the Old Testament as "the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob" is now defined as "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁹ *the Father of glory, give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of him.* The Apostle is seeking special gifts from the Holy Spirit for all his readers: wisdom, which enables one to penetrate the mystery of God, and also revelation which is not a recognition of new truths, but rather of special light from the Holy Spirit so as to have a deeper appreciation of the truth of faith or of the will of God in a particular situation.⁹ **18** *May the eyes of your hearts* In biblical thinking, the heart is the center of the person, where thinking, willing, and feeling originate.⁸ *be enlightened,* Enlightenment of the innermost vision means an openness to the truth, but also the recognition of what deserves to be clung to. When enlightened by the Holy Spirit, it recognizes what things are worth loving and what things ought to be rejected and it goes farther, is more sublime and more perfect than mere reason.³ *that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call,* St Paul wants God to enlighten the minds of the Christians and make them realize the consequences of their calling to be members of the holy people of God, the Church. Hope is a supernatural virtue, infused by God into our soul, by which we desire and expect eternal life, promised by God to his servants, and the means necessary to obtain it.⁹ *what are the riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy ones,* **19** *and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe, in accord with the exercise of his great might,* This expresses the theme of God's mighty power overcoming humanly impossible obstacles.⁵ **20** *which he worked in Christ, raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens,* The right hand is a position of royal honor and sovereignty.⁸ This expression shows that Christ shares in God's kingly authority.⁹ **21** *far above every principality, authority, power and dominion,* Names given in Jewish and Christian tradition to different choirs or orders of angels. They can refer to blessed angels or to demons who fell from their ranks. Paul's point is that God has elevated Christ far above all creation, including things visible and material as well as things invisible and spiritual.⁸ *and every name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come.* Jewish tradition distinguished between the present evil age and the coming messianic age. Just as Christ's coming marked the transition from the Old Covenant era to the New, so he will come again in glory to close the present age of history and open the future age of eternity.⁸ **22** *And he put all things beneath his feet* A position of subjection and defeat.⁸ *and gave him as head over all things to the church* St Paul sees the Church as the body of Christ and Christ as the head. The image of body and head highlights the life-giving and saving influence of Christ on the Church and at the same time emphasizes his supremacy over the Church.⁹ **23** *which is his body,* Christ reigns supreme over the cosmos and the universal Church, which is his "body."⁸ *the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.* Count the blessings this prayer includes: 1. knowledge of God through insightful wisdom, 2. enlightenment in hope that guides us through difficult times, 3. awareness of the inheritance that is ours, and 4. understanding of how powerful our faith is.⁷

Luke 24:46-53

Jesus said to his disciples:

46“Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day” The OT background is diverse (A) Isaac was for three days under a death sentence until God intervened to give him back alive to Abraham on the third day (Gen. 22:4-13). This was a historical preview of Jesus rising to new life after obeying his Father unto death (Heb. 11:17-19). (B) The experience of Jonah coming forth from a whale after three days in its stomach foreshadows Christ emerging from the grave after three days in the earth (Jon. 1:17, Mt. 12:40). (C) Hosea depicts Israel’s restoration from exile as a third-day resurrection (Hos. 6:2) Since the Messiah represents Israel in the fullest sense, embodying both its vocation and destiny, Christ’s own Resurrection initiates the resurrection of Israel from a state of spiritual death (Rom. 11:15, 25-27). (D) More generally, the “three days” motif is linked with a prelude to divine liberation (Ex. 10:21-23) and a period of preparation before meeting the Lord (Ex.19:10-11).¹¹

47and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name This phrase expresses faith in the divinity of Jesus: what was formerly said only of Yahweh is now used of Jesus.⁵ **to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.** The Church dispenses the blessings of the New Covenant through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Salvation now extends beyond Israel to encompass all nations.¹¹

48You are witnesses of these things.

49And behold I am sending the promise of my Father This refers to the Holy Spirit who, some days later, at Pentecost, would come down upon them in the upper room.¹² The outpouring of God’s Spirit was long promised in the OT (Is. 44:3, Ezek. 36:26, Joel 2:28-29).¹¹ **upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”**

50Then he led them out as far as Bethany, A village about 2 miles east of Jerusalem.¹¹ **raised his hands,** Jesus raised his hands bearing the imprint of nails.¹³ **and blessed them.** This is the only time in Luke that Jesus blesses people, thus concluding the liturgy of his life.¹⁰

51As he blessed them he parted from them and was taken up to heaven. There is no implication that Christ is no longer present in the world or is inactive. Rather, Christ has taken on the role of intermediary in a new and entirely spiritual way.⁷

52They did him homage This is the only time in the gospel that Luke shows us the disciples worshiping Jesus.¹⁰ **and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy,**

53. **and they were continually in the temple praising God.** Luke both opens and closes his gospel in the temple in Jerusalem.¹¹

Some of the information for this commentary was taken from: (1) “The Navarre Bible: Acts Of The Apostles”, (2) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Acts of the Apostles” With Introduction, Commentary and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (3) “St Joseph Commentary On The Sunday Readings” by Achille Degeest, O.F.M., (4) “The Catechism Of The Catholic Church”, (5) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary”, (6) “The New Rosary In Scripture” by Edward Sri, (7) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2004” by Aelred R. Rosser, (8) “Ignatius Catholic Study bible: The Letters of St. Paul to the Galatians & Ephesians” With Introduction, Commentary and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (9) “The Navarre Bible: Captivity Epistles,” (10) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1998” by Lawrence E. Mick, (11) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of LUKE” With Introduction, Commentary and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (12) “The Navarre Bible: ST LUKE,” (13) “Life Of Christ” by Fulton J. Sheen, and (14) “Workbook for Lectors, Gospel Readers, and Proclaimers of the Word: 2010,” by Graziano Marcheschi with Nancy Seitz Marcheschi.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.