

THE ASCENSION
The Second Coming
A Man Rules Heaven

May 28, 2009

GOSPEL: Luke 24:36-53

EPISTLE: Acts 1:1-12

The Feast Day of the Ascension is one of the twelve Major Feast Days of the Church Year and commemorates the last day of the physical presence of the risen Christ among His disciples. In the Orthodox Church, Ascension Day is always on a Thursday, forty days after Pascha. In the West, Ascension Day is sometimes the Seventh Sunday after Easter (or the Sunday before Pentecost.)

Today's Gospel and Epistle lesson both address the Ascension: the Gospel lesson ends with the Ascension and the Epistle lesson begins with the Ascension. Both accounts were written by the Evangelist Luke and addressed to "most excellent Theophilus" (Luke 1:3, Acts 1:1) who had been instructed in the Faith (Luke 1:4) and who was a governor in Antioch according to tradition (Unger, Bible Dictionary, p. 1088.) Luke was also from Antioch. In the account read from Acts then, Luke picked up where he left off a few years earlier in his chronicle for Theophilus. Both of these readings are commonly used in the West for Ascension Day also.

PARABLES OF THE ASCENSION

Three Old Testament readings are included in the readings for Vespers of the Ascension. These readings give us additional insight in to the Ascension and its relation to the Second Coming:

Isaiah 2:2-3 - The Mountain of the Lord

In this reading, the House of the Lord is referred to as a mountain and all nations will stream to it. This mountain is raised above all the other hills and many people will say, "Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways and that we may walk in His paths" (v.3).

At this time " the Law will go forth from Zion and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He will judge between the nations and will reprove many peoples. And they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation and never again will they learn war" (vv.3-5).

The above clearly refers to conditions that are put in place after the Second Coming. Yet the "House of the Lord" is the Church (1 Timothy 3:15) and we have a foretaste of this mountain now. In the Church, the Lord "teaches us concerning His ways that we might walk in His paths" (v.3). From this perspective, the Church is "a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden" (Matthew

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5:14), and the Church is raised above all the other hills (v.2). For more discussion of this, see the Gospel lesson for the Sunday of the First Six Ecumenical Councils (July).

Isaiah 62:10-63:9 - The Second Coming

As the Lord's disciples stood on the Mount of Olives gazing toward heaven watching the Lord being taken up by a cloud, two angels said to them, "This same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:9-11). In this reading from Isaiah, the Lord's return is described. Some details mentioned are:

- He comes as a King, majestic in His apparel, marching in the greatness of His strength (63:1; see also Revelation 19:11, 12, 16).
- His clothing is stained red from treading the wine trough of His anger against His enemies (63:2, 3; see also Revelation 19:13-18).
- Everyone clears the way as He enters Jerusalem (62:10).
- He brings rewards with Him (62:11).
- His people are called "the holy people", "the redeemed of the Lord", and "a city not forsaken" (62:12).

At this time, the Lord's compassion for His people was remembered; His people praised Him for:

- His great goodness toward the House of Israel (v.7)
- Their affliction where He was afflicted also (v.9; see also Matthew 25:31-45)
- The angel of His Presence who saved them and redeemed them (v.9)
- How He lifted them and carried them all the days of old (v.9).

Zechariah 14:1-11 - The Living Waters

This reading also speaks of the Second Coming and how the Lord will stand on the Mount of Olives at His arrival. On Palm Sunday, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, (Mark 11:1-11) He gave us a prelude to the Second Coming. Knowing the above prophecies, the people very easily misinterpreted His actions. The Mount of Olives will be split by a valley running East-to-West, and people will flee as they did during the earthquake in the days of Uzziah, king of Judah (vv.4-5, Amos 1:1). The Apostle John gave more details regarding this great earthquake saying that the great men of the earth will try to hide in caves from the face of Him Who sits on the Throne (Revelation 6:12-17). In those days, "the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations (who plunder Jerusalem), as when He fights on a day of battle" (Zechariah 14:3, Revelation 19:11-19). Then Jerusalem will dwell in security (v.11).

Following the battle, the Lord will be King over all the earth (v.9, Revelation 11:15, 20:6, 22:5). All the land will be changed into a plain except for Jerusalem which will rise and remain on its site (v.10). The dimensions given to John were a height of about 1300 miles (Revelation 21:16).

Living waters will flow out of Jerusalem, half toward the "eastern sea" (probably the Persian Gulf) and half toward the "western sea" i.e. the Mediterranean Sea (v.8). These living

waters are also described as a river proceeding from the Throne of God, and the Tree of Life is described as being on either side of the river bearing twelve fruits, one every month (Revelation 22:1-2). Yet this is not necessarily just physical water, since there is no longer any sea (Revelation 21:1). The living water was referred to by the Lord as the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39), and thus the exact meaning of all these illustrations is a mystery that still needs to be revealed (Revelation 10:7). In keeping with this, the Matins service and Liturgy are filled with allusions to the Spirit, the Comforter, that the Lord promised to send (Luke 24:49, John 14:26, 15:26). The Ascension is then the prelude to Pentecost.

EPISTLE LESSON: Acts 1:1-12

The Ascension demonstrates the acceptance by God the Father of the Son's work on earth. The Resurrection was the first sign of this acceptance and Pentecost will be the conclusion. As the Son rises and is received by a cloud, we are reminded of the ascending of the smoke of the sacrifice from the altar of God. In this case the sacrifice is accepted and the victim is admitted to God's Presence, behind the veil (Hebrews 9:12). His position in light of the Ascension is at the Right Hand of Power.

The Right Hand of Power

At His trial, the Lord had told His accusers, "Hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the Right Hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matthew 26:64, Mark 14:62). This the High Priest considered blasphemy and asked for the death sentence (Matthew 26:65, Mark 14:62). At His Ascension, the two angels told the disciples, "This same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). As He ascended, "a cloud received Him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9). Daniel spoke of Him coming on the clouds of heaven (Daniel 7:13), and the Lord confirmed this to His disciples (Matthew 24:30).

Coming on the clouds is reminiscent of the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that led Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 13:21-22, 14:24). Other encounters with the cloud:

- Moses ascending Mt. Sinai into the cloud to receive the Law (Exodus 24:16-18)
- The pillar of cloud stood at the entrance to the Tabernacle to speak to Moses (Exodus 33:9)
- When the Ark entered Solomon's Temple, the cloud filled the house and the priests could not stand to serve (1 Kings 8:10-11; see also Exodus 40:35)
- At the end of time, smoke similarly fills the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony in heaven (Revelation 15:5-8)

The term Right Hand of Power comes primarily from the Psalms. For example, the Lord's Right Hand:

- Is exalted and victorious (Psalm 89:13, 98:1, 118:15)
- Saved David, the anointed king (Psalm 20:6, 60:5, 108:6, 138:7)
- Possessed the Promised Land (Psalm 44:3, 78:54)
- Is majestic in power (Exodus 15:6)
- Seeks out and swallows enemies (Psalm 21:8, Exodus 15:12)
- Went at the right hand of Moses (Isaiah 63:12)

Yet there are other things associated with the Lord's Right Hand:

- It spread out the heavens (Isaiah 48:13)
- It plants vines; i.e. Churches (Psalm 80:15-17)
- It is full of righteousness (Psalm 48:10)
- It teaches us awesome things (Psalm 45:4)
- It provides support (Psalm 18:35, 63:8, 139:10; Isaiah 41:10)
- It is a place of refuge (Psalm 17:7)
- The Queen Mother sits there (Psalm 45:9; 1 Kings 2:19)

The Lord told His disciples when He met them in Galilee, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." (Matthew 28:18-19). In the Epistle lesson, He said, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Thus, just as "His Glorious Arm went at the right hand of Moses" (Isaiah 63:12), so it did with the Apostles after Pentecost. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is also called "The Helper" (i.e., one called alongside to help, John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7), and Jesus had told His disciples of the coming of the Holy Spirit at the Last Supper (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit in us is a key element in the coming together of "the city with solid foundations whose craftsman and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10). With the Holy Spirit at work in us, we are described as containing treasure in earthenware vessels (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Restoring the Kingdom to Israel

From this point of view, the question of Jesus' disciples just before He ascended is very timely, "Lord will You at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). The answer was no; the city's not ready yet! The treasure in the earthenware vessels still needs some work. By using gifts the Holy Spirit has given us, and by confessing Christ before men, the treasure gets refined and the city gets ready. But He did not address that. The Lord's answer was, "It is not for us to know the times or seasons which the Father has put under His own authority" (Acts 1:7).

Instead of predicting the exact moment of His Second Coming, the Lord instead focused His disciples attention on things coming up soon. First, they were to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes upon them. Second, they were to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the end of the earth (v.8).

A few weeks earlier, the Lord had been sitting with His disciples on the same Mount of Olives that He ascended from, teaching them about what to expect prior to the Second Coming. They had asked, "What will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3)

He said that first:

- Many will come in His Name, claiming to be the Messiah (Matthew 24:5, 23, 26).
- There will be wars and rumors of wars (Matthew 24:6)

- Nation will rise against nation; there will be famines, pestilences and earthquakes (Matthew 24:7)
- His disciples will be persecuted, hated and killed by all nations for His Name's sake (Matthew 24:9)
- Many false prophets will come and deceive many (Matthew 24:11, 24)
- Lawlessness will abound; the love of many will grow cold (Matthew 24:12)
- The Gospel will be preached in all the world as a witness to all nations before the end (Matthew 24:14)
- Just prior to the end will occur the "abomination of desolation" spoken of by Daniel. What this really means will not be clear until it happens (Matthew 24:15, Daniel 9:27)
- A persecution unprecedented in human history will take place (Matthew 24:16-22)
- The Lord's coming will be like the lightning that comes from the East and flashes to the West, and all will be gathered to Him as eagles gather to a carcass (Matthew 24:27, 28).

All of the above Jesus spoke to His disciples while sitting with them on the Mount of Olives during Holy Week just prior to His Crucifixion. At the Ascension, about 44 days later, when they asked Him "Lord will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6), there was another aspect to His answer. He had already told them, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18). They had witnessed His incredible miracles for three years capped by His victory over death itself. Following His Resurrection, they had seen and touched His glorified, but still human body and had witnessed Him pass through solid walls (John 20:19-26) and teleport Himself at will (Luke 24:31). What more could there be? This was what the Prophets had spoken about: The Son of David reigning on His father's throne forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16, Luke 1:32, Isaiah 9:7).

Yet the Lord deflected their inquiry with: "It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has put in His Own authority" (Acts 1:7). The times and seasons that the Lord was inaugurating were the times of the Gentiles (Romans 9, 10). The kingdom was not to be restored to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles came (Romans 11:25). For the disciples present at the Ascension, this would have been very difficult for them to hear. Even later on, many had difficulty accepting Cornelius (Acts 11:1-18), Peter had to be rebuked in Antioch (Galatians 2:7-16) and a Church Council had to be called regarding Paul's ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 15).

John Chrysostom stated that they were asking for things greater than their capacity (Homily II on Acts 1). For them to hear Paul calling the Gentiles in Galatia "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16) would have been too much for them especially since they didn't have the Grace of the Holy Spirit yet.

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GOSPEL LESSON - Luke 24:36-53

Today's Gospel lesson is also used in the Orthodox Church as one of the eleven Gospels of the Resurrection that are read at Matins on a rotating basis. For a Special Feast Day, a different Matins Gospel may be read that pertains to that Feast Day. Thus, today's Gospel lesson is read often in the Orthodox Church.

The Gospel lesson begins with Jesus' first appearance to the Eleven (minus Thomas) after the Resurrection (v.36, John 20:19). At this point He had appeared to Mary Magdalene at the tomb (John 20:11-18), to all the Myrrh-Bearing Women as they returned from the tomb (Matthew 28:9-10), to Luke and Cleopas on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-31), and to Peter (Luke 24:34). Having heard of His resurrection from numerous witnesses, the Eleven were undoubtedly aroused in their desire to see Him. But they expected to see Him as He was. When He appeared to them, passing through solid walls, their initial reaction was, "They were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit" (v.37). This was the same reaction they had when He came to them on the storm-tossed Sea of Galilee, walking on the water at the fourth watch of the night, or 3:00 A.M. to 6:00 A.M. (Mark 6:48-49).

Jesus' words to them were first, "Peace to you" (v.36), and then, "Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have" (vv.38,39). Following this, Jesus asked for some food and ate a piece of broiled fish and some honeycomb in their presence (vv.41, 42).

The foregoing outlines an enormously important aspect of the Resurrection that was distorted by the First Century Gnostics. They claimed that Christ was a Theophany and not a true human being. They denied the Incarnation and claimed that Jesus just assumed a human-like body as He did when He appeared to Abraham (Genesis 18) and to others.

Some examples of these Gnostic heretics are Nicholas, one of the first seven deacons (Acts 6:5), who later taught that physical things like food offered to idols and sexual immorality didn't matter (Revelation 2:6, 14-15). To him, all that mattered were spiritual things. Other Gnostics who distorted the Resurrection were Hymenaeus, Philetus and Alexander (2 Timothy 2:16-18, 1 Timothy 1:19-20, 2 Timothy 4:14). For more details about this, see the Epistle lessons for the 28th and 30th Sundays after Pentecost, and the Study "Simon Magus the Heresiarch".

Commenting on Christ's appearance, Cyril of Alexandria (4th-5th Century) said, "To convince them firmly and indubitably that He is the same Who suffered, He immediately shows that being God by nature, He knows what is hidden, and that the tumultuous thoughts within them do not escape Him; for He said, 'Why are you troubled?' And this is a very plain proof that He Whom they see before them is not some other person, but the very same Whom they had seen both suffering death upon the Cross and being laid in the tomb, even Him Who sees our insides and our heart and from Whom nothing that is in us is hid."

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“To prove both that death is conquered and that human nature has put off corruption in Him as the predecessor, He shows His hands and His feet and the holes of the nails and permits them to handle Him (Compare 1 John 1:1), and in every way convince themselves that the very body which had suffered was risen. Let no one cavil at the Resurrection; though you hear the Scripture say, ‘It is sown a natural (Greek: *psuchikos* = breathing, as in a fleshly body that breathes) body, it is raised a spiritual body’ (1 Corinthians 15:44), do not deny the return of human bodies to incorruption (1 Corinthians 15:42). For as the natural is subject to natural, that is to fleshly lusts, so also the spiritual is that which submits itself to the Will of the Holy Spirit. For after the Resurrection from the dead, there will be no longer the opportunity for carnal affection, but the goad of sin will be entirely powerless; that very body which has been brought down to the earth shall be clothed with incorruption” (Commentary on Luke, Chapter 24).

After eating the fish and honeycomb, Jesus began to “open their understanding that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (v.45). He began with the Crucifixion explaining “that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me” (v.44). He went on to say that “Thus it is written and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His Name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things” (vv.46-48).

The disciples seemed to understand Him now, whereas before the Crucifixion they didn’t understand and it was hidden from them (Luke 18:31-34). Before the Crucifixion when He told them about the Cross, they were exceedingly sorrowful (Matthew 17:23). Now, even after He was parted from them and carried up into heaven (v.51), they returned to Jerusalem with great joy (v.52). The Ascension was the Lord’s joy at having accomplished His mission. Now that His disciples understand this, their love for Him has increased so that they can rejoice in His joy.

In His Ascension, Jesus took His human body (of flesh and bones: v.39) to heaven. Enoch (Genesis 5:24, Hebrews 11:5) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:10-14) had already been taken to heaven with a human body; and Moses was there also, as evidenced by his transfiguration along with Jesus (Mark 9:4). But neither of these three saints had the resurrected, incorruptible body that Jesus had. Christ entered heaven with a resurrected and glorified humanity.

In this glorified body after the Resurrection, some people who knew Him well didn’t recognize Him at first. Some examples of this are Mary Magdalene at the tomb (John 20:11-17), Luke and Cleopas on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-33) and the Apostles fishing on the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-7). There was something different about His resurrected body, yet it was still recognizable on closer inspection. The nail holes were still there and were recognizable as nail holes (John 20:25, 27); the spear puncture wound was still there (John 19:34). But yet the mortal (i.e. His human nature) had put on immortality and thus was changed.

In this transcendent, immortal body, He ascended to His Father. And “with His Own blood, He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12). This has significant implications for us in the Body of Christ, the Church. Paul wrote how Christ “raised us up together and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6). This takes place around the Lord’s Table at the Lord’s Supper, where He said, “This cup is the New Covenant in My blood” (Luke 22:20, 1 Corinthians 11:25). How the

bread and wine becomes His resurrected body and blood is a mystery just as how His glorified body passed through solid walls (John 20:19) is a mystery; and those who serve at the Altar are called stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4:1). If we refuse to eat the Lord's body and blood, we have no life in us; doing so, we have eternal life (John 6:53-58), for we partake of the New Covenant.

Thus by the man Christ entering heaven, He has opened the door to all humanity. His disciples understood this at the Ascension and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the Temple praising and blessing God (Luke 24:52, 53). At Pentecost, the Twelve even extended the invitation to the very people who had crucified their Lord saying, "For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39).