

Divergence on the Lectionary - Feast of the Ascension, All Years

First Reading

Acts 1:1–11

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Ephesians 1:15–23

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one

to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 24:44–53

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

There are two very different things I feel moved to say about our reading from Acts for Ascension. One is about the promise of the Holy Spirit, the other is about the Ascension of Jesus.

First - About the Promise of the Holy Spirit

Jesus instructed His disciples to wait for the promise of the Father. The word translated “ordered” (*parangelos*) might be translated that way, but it really doesn’t carry that much weight. It’s about giving direction, not giving a stern order (which would be *epitimeo*). But what I really want to point to is that He didn’t want his disciples going off to preach the Gospel until they’d received all that the Father had promised them, the Holy Spirit. And of course, when the Spirit does descend on them thousands are brought to belief through the Spirit’s actions in and through them.

I would be mistaken if I were to say that we also should wait until Holy Spirit has come upon us before trying to spread the Gospel. Holy Spirit has come and is with us, and is in us. And yet I am keenly aware of the number of times I have stood up to preach or sat down to write without availing myself of that Presence. I don't need to beg Holy Spirit to come (thank you Graham Cooke for reminding me of that today) but I am hobbled in my attempts to share the love of God if I have not listened to the Spirit speaking peace and joy to my heart before I open my mouth or put fingers to keyboard. Wait for the promise of the Father.

Second, About the Ascension of Jesus

Have you ever started to research a text only to wish that you hadn't? Well, I almost got to that point with this text this week.

It turns out that there is a very confused and quite unresolved question about which ancient texts to trust with regard to these first few verses of Acts and the last few verses of Luke. They vary in some fairly important details, especially with regard to whether or not they even mention Jesus ascending into heaven. It turns out that there are two major versions of Luke/Acts, the "Western" family of manuscripts and the "Alexandrian" family. In some there is no mention in Luke 24:51 of Jesus being taken "into" heaven, and in some, there are. In some there are mentions of the same in Acts 1:11, in others there are not. Scholars are at something of an impasse when it comes to sorting out which versions are the most original.

This isn't to say that Luke didn't believe that Jesus ascended into heaven, or that he didn't write it. The whole discussion took me a lot of reading and fretting over "*eis tou ouranou*" and "*analambano*" to come to the realization that I had missed the nugget of gold buried in all the gobbledy-gook I'd read. And here it is.

One scholar quoted by another scholar (I couldn't find the original article) declared that he believed that in his reconstruction of a likely original text, he had demonstrated that Luke saw the entire process, from crucifixion through resurrection and finally to ascension as all part of what it meant that Jesus was taken up. It is all part of being returned to the Father. It's all one thing! And when I came back to that point after reading so much else, that's when my heart began to burn as He opened to me the Scriptures.

We are celebrating, this fortieth day after Easter, the Ascension of Jesus, and yet for Luke, the whole 43 days are included in His Ascension. This of course evokes for me John's understanding of the Crucifixion as the moment of Jesus' "lifting up,"

(Ascension?) His glorification. There is a unity here in Luke that I'd missed and an unexpected resonance with John.

What we celebrate today is not an event that belongs to itself. It isn't even the climax of these 40 (or 43) days. It is simply the conclusion of the process of Jesus being "lifted up," of His Ascension.

Second Reading

One year, after hearing Bill Johnson preach on this text from Ephesians, I decided that I would too. I unabashedly preached Bill's sermon with some additions of my own (giving him credit, mind you) but it took me four weeks to his one. No way I'd get away with preaching for 40+ minutes in an Episcopal church!

The thing is, this passage is too rich to digest all in one week anyhow. I still have a recording somewhere of Bill's sermon, but there's so much in it that by the time he gets to the end, I feel somewhat overwhelmed, even now. To be honest, having heard his message on this part of Ephesians 1, I get overwhelmed just reading it. I won't try to reproduce those sermons here, just suggest the highlights.

In this early segment of Ephesians, Paul first prays that his readers receive the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation, that the eyes of their hearts might be enlightened. This prayer wasn't just for the Ephesians. It is for every reader of this letter. That's you and me. This prayer declares this Spirit over us, bringing wisdom and revelation.

And what does this Spirit reveal? The hope to which God has called us. In the midst of a world that is rapidly losing hope, Paul speaks hope. Not just human hope, but hope that God holds out to us.

What else does this Spirit of wisdom and revelation reveal? What are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. Stop and read that again. "*His*" inheritance is in the saints. That's you and me. We are His *glorious* inheritance, we are that for which He longs and in that inheritance, in us, He sees *riches*.

Another thing this Spirit reveals - the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us, this is the power at work when God raised Jesus from the dead. The power that rolled away the stone, caused the earth to shake, and brought forth the resurrected Jesus, that same power is *toward us*, aimed at us.

This same power put Jesus above all things, above all rule and authority and power, and put all things under His feet, and we, who are His body, in Him, are seated there with

Him. Yes, we still experience the woes of this world, but we experience them from our place *in Him*. All those things that seem too loom over us are in fact beneath us, seated with Him.

This is not prosperity gospel preaching. This is just the mindset that is ours in Christ Jesus if we will just accept it. In a time in the US when I am troubled daily by the direction things are taking, I am encouraged to continue to view the maelstrom in which I live from my point of view *in Jesus*, seated above all earthly power and dominions. This doesn't exempt me from working to bring justice and mercy and peace into being in my world, but it does help me to do so *from* a place of victory rather than working *for* a victory that is already won. A good remedy against burn-out.

Gospel Text

Most of what I might say about this passage I've already said in my comments on the Ascension as it's found in Acts above, or in the Divergence on Acts for the Seventh Sunday of Easter.

There is one translational bit I'd like to point to, though, and it points to the biases of the translators of the ESV.

In Luke 24:47 there are two textual variants both of which are well attested in the ancient manuscripts. In one Jesus says that His disciples will preach "repentance *and (kai)* the forgiveness of sins." In the other, Jesus says that they will preach "repentance *for (eis)* the forgiveness of sins." In the first, the two are related, but separate subjects. In the other one is required for the second. Our ESV translators chose the second set of manuscripts. If you read the NRSV, or the NKJV, or the ASB, they choose the first.

In my copy of the Textual Commentary on the NT, Metzger points out that both usages can be found in Luke. He wrote both in different places. Peter uses the first form in Acts 5, John the Baptist uses the second form in Luke 3. So which do we choose?

This is one of those moments where our choice is made for us by the Jesus that we know. Peter, who knew Jesus and His preaching, says "and." John the Baptist, who anticipated Jesus but got a lot of things wrong about the sort of Messiah He would be, said, "for." For those of us who know Jesus, we know that our forgiveness leads us to "repentance," to *metanoia*, to the changing of our minds, of our thinking. We discover that God is better than we'd thought, and that we are indeed better than we'd thought, at least in God's eyes.

But a lot of people still want to make forgiveness conditional. They just can't accept that the Gospel is as scandalous as it is. And so some copyist changed *kai* to *eis*, because he liked John the Baptist's version of Jesus better than Peter's. And a lot of scholars chose that copyist's version of Luke 24:47 because they just can't get their minds and hearts around the scandal, either. It's sad, but that's the way of things when you study the Bible.