



Ascension Sunday Scripture Reflection

By Very Rev. Dr Brian Boyle EV

The feast of the Ascension is celebrated forty days after Easter and prior to the feast of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit on the community of the disciples, as promised by the risen Lord. The time between resurrection and ascension were not idle days for the risen Lord and his disciples. Christ spent this time further instructing them about the meaning of his death and resurrection and preparing them for the coming of the Spirit.

We find accounts of the ascension of Christ in Mark's gospel (16:19-20) and especially in the writings of Luke, in his gospel (24:50-53) and in the Acts of the Apostles (1:6-11). Luke is the great protagonist of Christ's ascension among all the New Testament writers.

The key emphasis of the accounts of the ascension is not on the physical departure or absence of Christ but rather on his status of divine intercession now with the Father: Christ sits at God's right hand. The Lucan accounts of the ascension have Christ being physically lifted up. Our attention should not be on the literal nature or otherwise of this narrative but rather on Christ's return to the Father, as our intercessor.

Two key experiences of the early Christian community come together, as it were, in the ascension of Christ: first, the community becomes aware that the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus have become less frequent and in fact have ceased, and second, the community experiences more and more the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said that he would have to depart in order for the Spirit to come. The conclusion the community draws, therefore, is that Christ has gone back to heaven. Ascension is their way of expressing this truth.

John's Gospel does not use the word "ascension" nor is there a narrative of Christ's ascension as we find, for example, in Luke's writings. However, John arguably has the best theology of ascension in the New Testament writings with his theme of Jesus having come from the Father and returning to the Father, a key theme of the Gospel and developed at some length in the farewell discourse of Jesus at the last supper (chapters 14-17).

In Luke's account of the ascension in Acts Christ says to the gathered disciples: "... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and then you will be my witnesses" (1:8). These are powerful words. The departure of Jesus means the disciples become empowered witnesses. The emphasis is on being a witness.

The Sandhurst church is now preparing for the second session of the Plenary Council to be held in Sydney in July. Like the early Christian community, gathered in prayer around Mary, the mother of Jesus (Acts 1:14), awaiting the Spirit, we too have been gathered in prayer, discerning the mission of the Church in Australia, responding to the invitation of the Spirit of the risen Lord, to be his witnesses. The Plenary Council process is one way of putting into practice the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God. In other words, we are practising 'synodality': learning to walk together as Church.