

ASCENSION THURSDAY

May 30, 2019

First Reading – Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 47

Second Reading – Ephesians 1:17-23

Gospel – Luke 24:46-53

My dear people of God:

As we celebrate the Solemnity of the Ascension of our Lord, let us fix our gaze on our real destiny: heaven. But for us to reach heaven, we need to interiorize/internalize what the readings are telling us.

Please recall that the Book of the Acts of the Apostles is the second work of Luke, the evangelist. The first book is the Gospel. Having said that, we could appreciate how our second reading began: *“In the first book, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.”*(Acts 1:1) What did Luke say in his first book (the Gospel) ?

In the first book (GOSPEL), Luke portrayed Jesus as ONE BORN, CRUCIFIED, RISEN, AND ASCENDED LORD in the context of a drastic condensation of world history. It began with short stories of supernatural events: (1) the conception and birth of John the Baptist, born to the aged couple Zechariah and Elizabeth. There was a prophecy related to John’s birth who was born in an era when the Roman Empire was a world power; (2) the conception and birth of Jesus. More marvelous things and prophecies were associated with His birth.

The rest of the book illustrates how Jesus’ story reinterprets all other stories, tracing the roots of His ministry *through the history of Israel, the Temple, the Prophets, the Law, the Patriarchs, all the way back to Adam, and to God* (Luke 3:23-38).

The second book(ACTS OF THE APOSTLES), retained its links to this primal history. However, it began with a small band of the Apostles (still living under the rule of that same Roman Empire) but empowered by the Holy Spirit. They became Christ's *“witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”* (Acts 1:8).

This is where our reading began. From the start, these people overcome severe opposition and find the joy of life God intended from the beginning, enduring into the future.

Through the opening interchange between Jesus and the apostles, the second book reminded us of the “central element of history” that God created us for LIFE and HE PRESERVES US. *“He presented himself alive to them”* (Acts 1:3). But even if He physically departs from the earth, the Holy Spirit keeps alive God's purposes and brings God's life-giving power. We are a part of “a people and God in motion”. I am sure that in our hearts, God is telling us to move and keep alive His purposes and use His life-giving power to accomplish those purposes.

Now, let us go to the Second Reading: Paul is very emotional, academic in his letter to the Ephesians. This is a pedagogical thesis on who we are vis-à-vis a God who wants only the best for us. Paul greeted his Ephesian community with a prayer/wish that encompasses God's best wishes for His people. *“May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give to you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him; having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope of his calling, and what are the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to that working of the strength of his might”*.(verses 18-20).

What were the contents of Paul's prayers for these Ephesian Christians? These are:

- (1) the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him;
- (2) enlightenment that they might “know what is the hope of his calling;
- (3) to know the riches of the glory of his inheritance among the holy ones;
- (4) to know the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.

Brothers and sisters, please know that the word “glory” means not only the wonderful things from God, but more so on the aspect of God’s majesty; an aura associated with God’s appearance that reveals God’s majesty to humans. And Christ shares God’s glory:

- (1) the glory of the Lord was revealed at His birth (Luke 2:9)**
- (2) His disciples, Peter, James and John, were privileged to see Christ’s glory on Mount Tabor (the Mount of Transfiguration in Luke 9:28-36).**
- (3) Christ’s Cross was necessary so that He might “enter into His glory” (Luke 24:26 on the road to Emmaus). In fact, the Gospel of John in particular speaks of the Cross as Christ’s glorification (John 12:23; 13:31-32). And Jesus Himself spoke of returning “with power and great glory” (Luke 21:27).**

Now, back to our second reading. Please know that the term “spirit” (in Greek “pneuma”) in verse 17, does not mean the Holy Spirit. It means the prized wisdom that Greeks always sought after. So, Paul was praying that these Ephesian Christians would receive a “spirit of wisdom” because they always sought wisdom through philosophy.

However, for Paul, God is the source of all wisdom. God’s wisdom often manifests itself in ways that seem strange to us. Who would have ever thought that God’s wisdom was manifested: (1) in the birth of a BABY-SAVIOR in an obscure stable in an inconsequential place called Bethlehem? (2) and in the Cross of THE SAVIOR? Such things might appear foolish to most people, but “the foolishness of God is wiser than men” (1 Corinthians 1:25) and we know that God chose the foolish things of the world that He might put to shame those who are wise” (1 Corinthians 1:27).

Paul prayed that God will reveal Himself to these Ephesian Christians. God will make it possible for them to know Him more intimately and come to an understanding of God’s will for their lives. God will give the eyes of their hearts enlightenment. In this context, heart (kardia) refers to *the center of one’s being, both physical and spiritual*: all that which makes the individual person what he or she is - character, intellect, and personality. Paul is praying that God will open the spiritual eyes of these Ephesian Christians so that their

very beings might be transformed by the spiritual insights that God alone can provide.

Another wonderful gift sought by Paul here is knowing/understanding the hope of their (Ephesians') calling/invitation to become members of the Kingdom of God, to experience adoption into God's family, to gain salvation and the hope of life eternal, and to realize the riches of the glory of their inheritance among the holy ones.

To become holy, a person must separate him/herself from that which is common. To be holy is to be "called out" from the sinful world into a deep and abiding relationship with God so that the person becomes holier and more God-like.

The emphasis here is not just that God is powerful, but that He is powerful "toward us who believe" - that God has harnessed this great power for our benefit - to effect our salvation.

All these God the Father had done in Christ, when He raised Christ from the dead, and made Him to sit at His (Father's) right hand in the heavens, far above all who share God's glory. Paul is saying that Christ's place at the right hand of the Father (in verse 20) gives Him overreaching power, not just in the age to come, but also in the present age. This is important to keep in mind lest we become discouraged, because it so often appears that godless forces are in control of our world. However, Christ's power will also be manifest if we will open our spiritual eyes to see it—and the day will come when His power will triumph completely over all the hostile powers.

Who are these ALL? They are the principalities, the authorities, the powers, and the dominions. Also included is every person who is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things for the assembly, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Now, let us go to the GOSPEL

The Ascension of Jesus simply denotes Jesus' physical body going up to heaven. And we know very well that His Divine Presence is with us. As a matter of fact, the Ascension is more of an Exaltation of Jesus and Lord

and King, at the right hand of God. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that today's Solemnity is more about WHO JESUS IS.

The evangelist Luke leads us to recall what Jesus predicted: that Christ must suffer and rise from the dead. It would benefit us greatly if we accept the idea that the word MUST here means that these things were necessary to happen for God's greater purposes.

Jesus immediately added the purpose for His suffering, death, and resurrection: so that repentance and forgiveness of sins can be proclaimed in His name to all nations" (verses 46-47).

After explaining the plans of God about repentance and forgiveness of sins being proclaimed in His name to all nations, Jesus declares to His disciples their role to be His witnesses to all these. They would not just be hearers nor spectators; they must become witnesses even to the ends of the earth.

And for them to accomplish this role, Jesus declared "*what His Father promised*" which will allow them to be "*clothed with power from on high*". What was this promise? Obviously it was the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13; and 12:11-12), who will enable the apostles to bear witness effectively (Luke 4:18-19). They would be empowered to be witnesses to Jesus when the call arises.

But Jesus instructed them to wait in Jerusalem. Why wait? And why in Jerusalem? why not in Galilee? Because it would be in the Temple of Jerusalem that they would continually praise God while awaiting the promised Advocate. Then, He led them out as far as Bethany and blessed them. Luke told us that while Jesus ascended, He blessed His apostles. Then, they returned to Jerusalem, "*continually in the temple praising God*" (verse 53).

Let us look at the Gospel of Luke with a pair of Greek eyes: (1) In chapter 2, verse 13, *a great army of heaven's angels appeared with the angel, singing praises for God* at the birth of Jesus; (2) in verse 20 of the same chapter, *the shepherds went back, singing praises to God for all they had heard and seen*. Obviously Luke wants us to realize that His Gospel begins and ends with praying and praising God with joy. This is the good news; this is our Gospel: to be joyfully praising God. Amen.

