

(R) ASCENSION DAY

(MAY 21ST, 2020)

Readings for Today: Acts 1: 1 – 11; Psalm 47 (46); Ephesians 1: 17 – 23; Matthew 28: 16 – 20.

The readings from Acts provided for today and for next Sunday (Acts 1: 12 – 14) together form the introduction to the second volume of Luke's work on the beginnings of the mission of Jesus in his Church. It would be a good idea to read the whole of the first chapter.

In these first verses of Acts Luke provides his reader with a summary of what he will have read in his first book, the Gospel: *all that Jesus began to do and to teach*, including his choice of the apostles and his appearances to them *alive...after his Passion*. Luke also points forward to the contents of this second book – the universal mission of the Church, led by the apostles as witnesses, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The event which both divides and links what has happened during the earthly life of Jesus and the future life of his Church is the Ascension. Luke – alone of the New Testament writers – recounts this as an observable event, as he will do with the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost. Other New Testament writings set out the theological meaning of the event. For example the letter to the Ephesians tells us that God has made Christ *sit at his right hand in heaven*, and has *put all things under his feet and made him as the ruler of everything, the head of the Church*.

Luke tells us that, having commissioned the apostles as his witnesses, Jesus *was lifted up and a cloud took him from their sight*. For Luke this is the last of the Resurrection appearances: from now on things will be different, because a new stage in God's dealings with the human race is about to begin. This difference has already been suggested by Christ's promise, *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you*, and it will be underlined by the words of the *two men in white* who suddenly appear near the apostles. Their assurance that *this same Jesus will come back in the same way as you have seen him go* indicates that the apostolic mission of the Church will last until the end of time, when Jesus will return on the cloud which has taken him to heaven.

There will be a brief interval – the nine days between Ascension Day and Pentecost – in which the apostles and their companions prepare for the gift of the Spirit. Luke describes their unity in prayer and the election of Matthias to fill up the number of the apostles. (*See the Reflection for 14th May*).

We too have a period of nine days in which to prepare for Pentecost. So let us pray for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that we may continue as faithful witnesses to the risen Christ *to the ends of the earth* and to the end of time.