

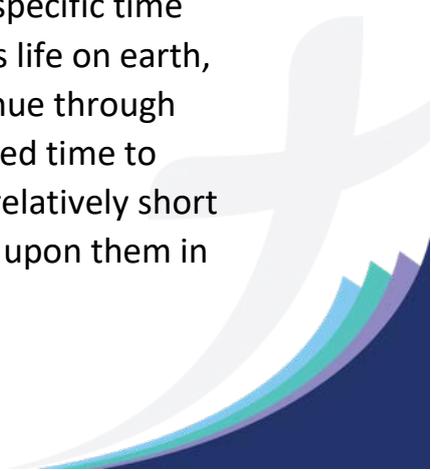
## The Ascension of the Lord



- The Catholic Church commemorates the Christian belief of the bodily ascension of Jesus. Ascension Day is the 40th day of Easter and occurs 39 days after Easter Sunday. Traditionally it was always celebrated on a Thursday and was a Holy Day of Obligation but has now been moved to a Sunday Solemnity.
- The Gospel is different each year. Year A is Matthew, Year B is Mark and Year C is Luke.
- The Gospel of Luke is the only one of the four canonical gospels that describes the ascension of Jesus and, to reiterate it, the writer begins with the same event at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. The opening verses of the Book of Acts, from the author of Luke-Acts, describe the final instructions of Jesus to his disciples and then his 'lifting up'. The fact that the other gospels don't discuss the ascension in any detail at all is a good indication that this description should not be taken literally.
- The ascension stories are not primarily interested in how or when Jesus got back to heaven. John and Paul never mention it at all. Mark and Matthew have it happening on the same day as the Resurrection and Luke has it occurring 40 days after Easter on the same day as Pentecost. The one thing, on which all the New Testament writers agree, is where in heaven Jesus went and where he is presently – at God's right hand.
- Even to this day, being on someone's right is a place of honour. In the Old Testament being on the right hand of David, Samuel or Elijah was to be the anointed and favoured one, the true son or daughter. In telling us, then, that Jesus is now at God's right hand, the gospels use a formal

phrase to announce that God affirms everything Jesus said and did on earth and that he is the way for us to follow.

- The biblical account given in the First Reading (Acts 1:1-11; see also Luke 24:46-53) does not mean that Jesus, at the end of his earthly career, literally ascended in the way described. The very clear parallels with the description of the ascent into heaven of the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 2:1-18) suggest that Luke is completing here his characteristic depiction of Jesus in terms of that persecuted prophet. Having escaped the clutches of his enemies by rising from the dead, Jesus now makes an Elijah-like ascent to heaven.
- In biblical language and imagery this mode of departure from the earth signals the truth that the One who had been crucified on the charge of being a political Messiah, a rebel against Rome, and who God raised from the dead in vindication of his true status, has now entered messianic glory at God's right hand.
- Jesus has indeed been removed from human sight to commence a messianic reign in heaven but this does not mean an abandonment of either the disciples or his saving mission in the world. On the contrary, through the Spirit, Jesus will be present and active in a new mode of being. The disciples had felt the power of the Spirit that was upon him during his earthly life. Now they are assured that, as a result of Jesus' messianic enthronement, an empowering 'clothing' with the Spirit will come down upon them and accompany them as they take his Word and witness 'to the ends of the earth'.
- Jesus sends his followers out 'to the whole world' to continue his ministry. The ascension, and the subsequent events of Pentecost, was essential for the shift in emphasis from the ministry being carried on by Jesus to the same ministry carried on by millions of people throughout time.
- The message of the ascension is a powerful one. It reminds us that Jesus, the human incarnation of God on earth, was limited to a specific time and place in history. Despite the physical limitations of his life on earth, Jesus ensured that his message and ministry would continue through those he had taught. Knowing that the disciples would need time to grieve and come to terms with all that had occurred in a relatively short space of time, Jesus promised that the Spirit would come upon them in



the days to come. That visiting of the Spirit upon the disciples at Pentecost was the motivation to set about doing what Jesus had charged them to do. Without the ascension, there is no Pentecost.

- It is the 'whole world' to which they are sent; not just their cosy little corner of the world but the whole world. It's what Christian people for the last 2,000 years have been called to do: continue Jesus' ministry to the whole world. It's what each and every Christian is called to do today: 'proclaim the Good News to all creation'.
- The Ascension is not just an opportunity for us to look back on how we have tried to fulfil the command of Jesus to go out to the world. Indeed, this feast is primarily focused on where we are going from here on in.
- This means proclaiming the Good News through everyday actions and by being open and honest about the Catholic faith. It means treating all people as Jesus would.

Compiled from the commentaries of Brendan Byrne SJ, Richard Leonard and Greg Sunter, sourced from Liturgy Help.

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