

[Readings: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Eph. 1:17-23; Matthew 28:16-20]

The lectionary book that contains the readings for Daily and Sunday Masses is composed in such a way that the First Reading from the Old Testament -- except during the season of Easter when this reading is taken from Acts -- functions as a type of image that is fulfilled in the Gospel.

On the feast of the Ascension, something strange happens. The first reading -- taken from Acts -- depicts the same event as the Gospel of Luke: the Ascension of Christ into Heaven. Luke and Acts, both written by St. Luke, although separated in our Bibles, originally were meant to be conceived as a single narrative, beginning with the conception of Jesus and concluding with Paul preaching in Rome. The original Gospel, Jesus Christ, the Word Made Flesh, is conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, is then preached in the heart of the Roman Empire.

The bridge between Luke and Acts is the moment of today's Feast of the Ascension. Luke ends with the Ascension, while Acts picks up from there. Still, the difference between the two accounts reveals something about the meaning of the Ascension in our daily Christian living.

Both Luke and Acts open up with an address to a man named Theophilus. It is impossible for us to know the identity of this man, whose name means "friend of God" or "God-lover." It's possible that this man existed. It's also possible that the title is intended for every Christian reader who has become a friend of God through Jesus Christ. The Gospel is written as a direct address to each of us. For you and me. At our baptism, we became "friends of God" and "God lovers."

In Luke, the Ascension is an occasion of joy. The disciples, drawn together by Jesus, are told once more about the Resurrection, receive a promise of the Holy Spirit and are exhorted to stay in Jerusalem.

Jesus leads them to Bethany, a mile and a half from Jerusalem, then tells them to go back. Having worshipped the Lord and given him homage, they return to Jerusalem full of joy -- adoring the Lord in the Temple.

Acts tells the same story, but emphasizes the fear experienced by the disciples. The evangelist provides a summary of what Jesus had said in Luke. But now it is the disciples who are the protagonists of the account. In the account of the Ascension that we have in today's Gospel version from Matthew, one phrase jumps up at me every time I read it: "They worshipped, but they doubted."

These disciples of Jesus have been with Him for almost three years. Jesus tried His best to teach, to challenge, to invite through His signs and wonders faith in Him and in His Father. And what are their parting words to Him as He ascends into Heaven? "Have a nice trip. Thanks a lot for everything. We don't fully believe everything you said to us!" OY!

They want to know if Jesus definitely is going to establish the Kingdom. Not the Kingdom of Heaven, but an earthly political empire just like all the rest. He tells them it is not theirs to know. In Acts, Jesus is depicted as ascending into Heaven, disappearing from their presence. Luke mentions an ascent, but Acts is specific -- Jesus disappears in a cloud.

A detail is added in Acts not present in Luke. The disciples encounter two men dressed in white, which parallel Luke's version of the moment of the Resurrection. They tell the disciples that Jesus will come again, descending from the clouds.

For two months, we have been, in a sense, in the dark, in the fog, "in the clouds" with this COVID-19 pandemic, its consequences, and its power. Those of you who live together – families, couples – I'm glad to see that you haven't killed each other! What have you learned during these two months of quarantine? How has this experience deepened your faith life?

Some have told me that this experience has been like being in a monastery. More time for deeper prayer and getting close to Jesus and to each other. This time has been a time not only of restrictions and quarantine, but a time of grace and blessing for so many of us.

Of all the correspondence I have gotten since Friday, the 13th of March when all of this extraordinary time began, the one comment that stirred me to the

soul was this: Does God want us to live and be healthy or to take risks and possibly die? Someone wrote: “we should not be afraid to be a COVID-19 martyr in the practice of our faith and worship.” WOW! I am still struggling with that opinion. How about you?

For most of you, these two months have been a time of longing for the Lord in the Most Holy Eucharist, which many of you will be receiving for the first time today. Let our time here be like the time in today’s Gospel, when the apostles began to long for their Lord and for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The departure of Christ has led to a new age, to the apostolic era in which Christ speaks now through the Church. He is still present; His voice resounds. But today it is not only the apostles, but all of us disciples who proclaim him now.

Likewise, the departure of Christ is not permanent. Christ will come again. The vocation of the Church, as we’ll learn next week on Pentecost, is to create the right conditions for this wonderfully glorious return. ALLELUIA AND AMEN!