

## Contexts

### Mark's Gospel

- Composed between 65-70 CE
- Generally accepted as the first Gospel written.
- Authorship is unclear but possibly written by John Mark, the companion of Peter in Rome.
- Begins with the ministry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, then the Baptism of Jesus, then Jesus battling the forces of evil in the wilderness.
- First action of Jesus is to establish a community to establish the kingdom of God.
- Major work of this community is the work of healing and restoring God's right order, as opposed to the order of Rome, or the order established by the scribes and Pharisees, or religious and cultural norms of the time.
- Cleansing & healing stories restore people to their proper (rightful) place in the Kingdom and in human society (no longer outcasts, despised, unclean, etc).
- The right order of God's kingdom shatters and goes beyond the human and religious limitations placed on some of God's beloved sons and daughters.
- There is a characteristic starkness in Mark's Gospel – it is the shortest of the 4 canonical Gospels.
- The Gospel is an 'action story', things happen quickly. Mark's use of 'immediately' occurs so often in the Gospel that the word is often omitted from translations.
- The disciples aren't heroes; they are more like us – well intentioned, sometimes misguided and stubborn men and women. One moment they can be admirable and the next so very dense, lacking all comprehension of what is really happening. Discipleship is a big concern in this Gospel. (Jude Siciliano OP)
- Often the story is told by contrast – who is truly blind: the blind beggar or the seeing disciples, etc.

### Mark 16:15-20

- We return to reading from Mark's Gospel after some weeks.
- We are reading from what is known as the 'longer ending' of Mark's Gospel. As far as we can tell there are 3 endings of this Gospel – the original, an additional 'shorter' ending and an additional 'longer ending'.
- 'Jesus showed himself to the Eleven' – In the longer ending, this episode takes place on the day of resurrection, after Jesus has appeared to Mary Magdalen and to two disciples on the road.
- This text omits the rest of verse 14 where Jesus takes the disciples to task for the lack of faith and stubbornness in not believing the witness of Mary Magdalen and the two disciples on the road that he had risen.
- The reading continues immediately with Jesus commissioning the 11 (presumably due to the absence of Judas) to proclaim the good news to 'all creation'. Judas' death is only recorded in Matthew's Gospel (by hanging) and in Acts (by falling down and bursting open).
- The 11 are to go out to *all the world* and proclaim the good news to the *whole creation* – a sign of the universal nature of redemption.
- Those who believe the witness will be saved; those who don't will be condemned.
- Then follows a section on the 'signs' which accompany those who believe – note: this is about the believers, not about the preachers. – they will cast out devils, speak in new tongues, pick up snakes, be unharmed if they drink anything deadly, lay hands on the sick who will be well again.

- After saying this Jesus ascends (was taken up) to heaven and sat at the right hand of God. Traditional place for the Son and Heir.
- Finally, FINALLY, the disciples respond – they preach everywhere, the Lord works with them and confirms the word with signs. (Remember the familiar pattern of hearing and doing, of word and deed?)
- Note that, for once, the disciples don't dither, are not slow to respond, don't spend time wondering where Jesus has gone – they just get on with it!

The Liturgical Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on for this Sunday?

It is perhaps a strange thing that the story of the ascension is told more elaborately in the first reading from the very beginning of the Acts of the Apostles (1:1-11) than in the Gospel reading for today.

But the purpose of Jesus' withdrawal is to allow the mission to thrive. There is not one preacher now (Jesus) but 11 and in time, many more. The task of the historical Jesus is complete; the task of the church as the living Body of Christ has just begun. Remember that the Gospels are written from a theological perspective not an historical one.

Presumably, the signs are a kind of proof of Jesus' continuing presence with the disciples. In the final verse, they 'confirm' the words spoken by the disciples – just as signs confirmed the words spoken by Jesus.

#### Reflection

The feast of the Ascension commemorates the return of Jesus to the Father. Jesus leaves in the body but remains with us through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Note: there is no Ascension and no separate Pentecost event in the Gospel of John. The original ending of Mark's Gospel contains no ascension of Jesus or separate Pentecost event. The later ending adds the ascension, but not Pentecost. Matthew's gospel contains no ascension or Pentecost. Only Luke has the ascension and a separate Pentecost event.

Liturgically, the Church follows the pattern suggested in Luke, where the Ascension occurs 40 days after the Resurrection, that is, on a Thursday. However, in many places (including Australia) the Feast is now transferred to the following Sunday. We will celebrate the gift and presence of the Holy Spirit in next week's feast of Pentecost (the fiftieth and last day of the Easter Season). Traditionally, the 9 days in between were a 'novena' of prayer in preparation for the celebration of Pentecost. This idea is still preserved in the special prayers and readings for masses in between Ascension and Pentecost. It is further reflected as the designated week for Prayer for Christian Unity.

The true meaning of the Ascension is not in Jesus' leaving, but in his sending out of the disciples and his continuing accompaniment of them on their mission.

The Feast of the Ascension proclaims that there is a life beyond that which we see and experience here; a life that we will all share in fully at the end of time. That awareness can bring a good perspective to the way we live our lives.

Next Sunday we will celebrate the feast of Pentecost, the feast of the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit Jesus remains present to the Church for all time. That Spirit is the presence of God which we carry within us and which enables us to be in communion with the Father and the Son, sharing their life.

Ever since Easter, we have been proclaiming that Jesus is alive. We have been listening to the stories of the first groups of disciples as they witnessed and preached the Good News. The feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost help us to realise that we are part of that long tradition of faithful disciples and our task is to witness and preach the way of Jesus in every thought, word and action. That is both our gift and our ministry, in Jesus' name, to the world.