

The Ascension is not to be understood literally as if Jesus floated up into space on his way to “heaven”. Where is “heaven”? Heaven should be conceived not as a place but as a relationship with God and God is everywhere in the whole universe. Jesus did not have to ‘go’ anywhere to be with his Father. The Ascension is part of what we call the Paschal Mystery. There are four inter-related parts: suffering and death; resurrection; ascension; and the sending of the Spirit.

They are closely interlocked as one reality. If the resurrection says that the crucified Jesus is alive, the Ascension says that the living Jesus has entered into glory, sharing on an equal level the glory of his Father. This is expressed in many different ways in different writings of our New Testament. We have three of these viewpoints or understandings in each of today’s readings. On God’s right hand In the Letter to the Ephesians (Second Reading) the fact is stated with great solemnity but without saying how it took place. The author speaks of the strength of [God’s] power at work in Christ, when he used it to raise him from the dead and to make him sit at his right hand, in heaven, far above every Sovereignty, Authority, Power, or Domination, or any other name that can be named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come.

This is basically the meaning of the Ascension, namely, that Jesus, our triumphant Messiah-King, reigns in glory over all creation. There is no mention of “where” he is or how he got there. If we go to the Acts of the Apostles (First Reading) we come to a description which, for many Christians, is the definitive account of the Ascension. Jesus rose on Easter Sunday and then spent 40 days instructing his disciples about the Reign or Kingship of God. The “lifting up” is to be understood more in a spiritual sense, as it is in John’s Gospel where he speaks a number of times about Jesus being “lifted up”. It refers in particular to the Risen Jesus being raised to the glory of God the Father.

As we saw on previous Sundays, in order to continue being with his disciples, Jesus had to leave them. His “old” presence in one human body, in one small corner of the world, reaching a small number of people, in one tiny period of history now gives way to a new presence that will reach the whole world in every age.

From now on wherever there is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness...”, wherever there is truth, love, compassion, justice, freedom, beauty the Spirit of Jesus is there. Same message, different location The emphasis here is not on the appearance of Jesus but on what he has to say to his disciples. It is in three parts – past, present and future.

First, Jesus tells them that all authority of the Creator God himself, has been given to him. To commit oneself totally to Jesus is to commit oneself to God. Second, Jesus gives the command to “make disciples” of people everywhere. He is thus passing on much of his own authority to his disciples. Pentecost will be the confirmation of this. They are to do what he did. They will have the power to reconcile the sinful with God and with the community and to decide who are not yet ready for reconciliation and full participation in the community’s life. The community has standards to keep in order to be a living and credible witness of Jesus and his Gospel. It has a corporate right to maintain those standards.

They are to teach, to heal, to break down the divisions that separate people. Baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit will be the symbol of incorporation as members of Christ’s Body, as disciples of Jesus. Always with us

Third, the Risen and Ascended Jesus is not far away. He is with his followers and will be with them to the end of time. It is a reminder of the promise made at the very beginning of Matthew’s Gospel, before the birth of Jesus: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name will be called Emmanuel (which means, God is with us)” (Matt 1:23) and again later on, “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matt 18:20). The gift of the Spirit is not mentioned but is clearly implied by the promise of the ongoing presence of Jesus.

Today’s feast then is a celebration of Jesus’ glory after his suffering and death – a glory in which we also hope to share. At the same time, we celebrate the ongoing presence of the Risen Jesus among us, a presence which calls on every one of us to be living witnesses to that presence here in our own community and to the ends of the earth.