

Notes on the readings for Ascension Day

Old Testament: Daniel 7: 9-14

Daniel was written at a time when Israel was facing a prolonged attack on its integrity as the worshippers of almighty God. It was written by Daniel, an unknown person and perhaps a pseudonym. Israel had been overrun and Temple worship stopped, to be replaced by pagan practices, including a pig placed on the alter. Daniel is in exile in Babylon, yet maintains his faith and praying constantly for the restoration of the worship of God. He receives visions of the overthrow of the tyrants. Then there is the imagery of the Ancient of Days, taking the imagery beyond the present time to the eternal dimension. There is judgement, and the vision of one like a man coming in the clouds and whose kingdom will never end. Jesus quotes these words before the Sanhedrin in Matt 26: 64; and previously in ch 24: 15-31. These verses throw light on the meaning of the Ascension.

Epistle: Acts 1: 1-11

The Ascension sees the birth of the Church as Jesus completes his earthly ministry. As we read these verses, we have to realise that Luke is trying to put into words events which are beyond words fully to describe or explain. Heaven and earth, height or depth are really meaningless in trying to define what happened. Heaven is to be with God, and we shouldn't imagine that God is located somewhere high above us – but is intimately tied up with his creation, so is closer to us than we often realise. The Ascension marks the time of Jesus returning to his Father. As he goes, he gives the disciples their instructions and commission – they are to await the gift of the Holy Spirit, then witness to the Kingdom of God. As Jesus goes, they stand there irresolute and are told that there will be a fulfilment, but meanwhile they are to fulfil their task of being witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Gospel: Luke 24: 44-53

The timescale of the Ascension in Luke's gospel differs from the one he gives in the Acts. This may reflect two different accounts of this event current at the time. Important is the way in which Jesus opened to the disciples the meaning of the Old Testament in explaining all that had occurred vv 44,45. As a result of his life, death and resurrection, they are to go out and preach forgiveness of sins, taking the message out to the world, starting where they are, using the power he will give them – the gift of the Holy Spirit. This has been the task of the Church throughout history, and is ours today. The Ascension confirms for Christians that Jesus is Lord, making this event a key moment in asserting that worldly powers, racial division, politics, the forces of nature, and our own selfish obsessions are of no effect when compared with the power of God in Christ to point us to where true power lies.