

PREGO EXTRA

Background notes
for the Gospels of
JUNE 2011
Year A



The Ascension of the Lord Matthew 28:16-20

2

These four verses constitute the end of Matthew's gospel. They recount the last recorded encounter between Jesus and his disciples and Jesus' last words to them.

Matthew does not describe Jesus' ascension.

The mountain in Galilee

Matthew does not name the mountain. However, it seems to be the same area as the places in Galilee previously mentioned earlier in the Gospel: the mountain in the temptations (4: 8), the location of the sermon on the mount (5: 1) and the place where the transfiguration happened (17: 1). Mountains have a symbolic value too; they are usually places difficult to access.

By arranging to meet the disciples in Galilee Jesus implicitly invites them to remember the beginning of their journey together.

The disciples' reaction : worship and doubt

Their reactions are in line with the way they behaved during the resurrection appearances, some were overcome, some doubted. However, some scholars point out that the original Greek could imply that there were not two distinct groups of people, the worshippers and the doubters, rather that the phrase could mean "they worshipped but had doubts".



The Great Commission

This is the name traditionally given to the following three sayings of Jesus. It is a concise description of what the early Church considered their role to be. It acts by virtue of this commission.

Today's reading is from the final section of the Eucharistic discourse in chapter 6 and the vocabulary changes radically from previous verses.

The significant words are no longer "bread from heaven" or "bread of life". The Jews were familiar with these ideas since their ancestors were sustained by the manna as they crossed the desert. Now they are 'flesh', 'blood' and 'eat' and are repeated often. There is a constant reference to food and drink.

The flesh of the Son of man

The meaning of the discourse has changed. In the preceding section Jesus nourished those who believed through 'revelation'. The verb 'believe' is now replaced by 'eat'. John is now speaking of the Eucharistic nourishment provided by the 'flesh of the Son of Man' v.53.

Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever

Jesus discourse has come full circle. He refers back to the pivotal phrase

"He gave them bread from heaven to eat"(6: 31).

Jesus is first of all the giver of the bread, a new Moses.

He is also the bread of wisdom and revelation who nourishes all who come to him in faith.

He is, finally, the Eucharistic source of eternal life for all who eat and drink the flesh and blood of the Son of Man.



Corpus Christi and devotion to the Eucharist

This feast has led people to meditate on the Eucharist and to discover new depths to the Sacrament. Popular devotion found its expression in street processions of the consecrated host in a monstrance protected from the sun by a canopy. Although such processions have all but disappeared in Britain, other signs of devotion remain, the burning lamp by the tabernacle, benediction services, Holy Hours, quarentore exposition.

Corpus Christi - The body and blood of Christ 8

John 6: 51-58



Origins of the feast of Corpus Christi

We owe the Feast of Corpus Christi to a Belgian nun, St Juliana of Cornillon. At first, the feast was only kept in her convent, but it proved so popular that it was instituted throughout the Church by Pope Urban IV in 1264. Before that, there had been no particular festival to mark the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Corpus Christi was made an obligatory feast by Pope Clement V in 1311 at the Council of Vienne and was celebrated in England from 1318 onwards.

In 1551, the Council of Trent described the festival as a 'triumph over heresy', meaning that when Christians celebrated the festival they affirmed their belief in the doctrine of transubstantiation, and thus the victory of the Church over those who did not accept that the host became the real body of Christ during the consecration at Mass. From the Middle Ages onwards, special Corpus Christi plays were staged to mark the occasion.

I am the living bread

For people today Jesus' words can be very difficult to understand and accept, and indeed some respond as the Jews did.

To this day Jews do not drink blood; it must be removed from any animal that is to be eaten.

However, the idea would have been quite normal in ancient times to anyone familiar with sacrifice.

When an animal was sacrificed, part of the raw flesh was given to the priests and worshippers to make a feast within the temple precinct.

They believed that the 'god' they worshipped was a guest and entered into the sacrifice and therefore that the worshippers were literally eating the 'god'.

It is given to all disciples and to us, even if, like them, we sometimes have doubts or hesitations. 3

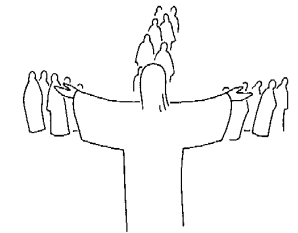
* **All authority has been given to me**

Jesus shows his authority over nature (the calming of the storm 4:35-41) and over spirits (the Gerasene demoniac 5:1-21)

God is the source of his authority as Jesus mentioned earlier in his ministry (11:27)

* **Make disciples of all the nations**

Whereas Matthew's main audience is made up of Jewish people, Jesus now seeks to reach all nationalities and races.



* **Baptise and teach them**

The disciples' work is clearly defined. They are to do this in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Greek word for baptise also means immerse, not necessarily in water. The disciples through their teaching of the Christian way of life are to immerse their new followers in the presence of God, above them (the Father), beside them (the Son), within them (the Spirit).

I am with you always

The last words of Matthew's gospel, take us back to its beginning, at the Annunciation (cf 4th Sunday of Advent) "They shall name him Emmanuel which means God is with us"(1:24)

The living presence of Jesus among us comforts and reassures us in our mission of evangelisation.

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."
(Matthew 18: 20)

Pentecost Sunday **John 20:19-23**

4

Pentecost.

Originally Pentecost was a Jewish festival called the Feast of Weeks. It was celebrated on the fiftieth day after the beginning of the grain harvest. It was a major feast and a very popular one on which Jews came to Jerusalem from all over the world to celebrate.

The Christian Feast of Pentecost

It is celebrated 50 days after Jesus' resurrection. We find St Luke's account of the first Christian Pentecost in today's first reading. (Acts 2:1-11).

Today's Gospel,

however, takes place on the evening of the day of Jesus' Resurrection. Here we see the fulfilment and meaning of the passage where Jesus tells his confused disciples that he would see them again "In a short time"(16:16-19)

Having appeared to Mary of Magdala that morning the risen Jesus now appears to his terrified disciples who meet behind closed doors aware that, as friends of Jesus, the Jews may be out to arrest or even kill them.

Chronological problems

As Jesus promised to send them the Spirit after he returned to his Father (15:26 and 16:7) we can only conclude that in John's gospel, the Resurrection, the Ascension and the coming of the Spirit all happen on the same day.

Scholars have puzzled over this and it now seems accepted that exact chronology is of secondary importance.



John's audience, towards the end of the 1st century, lived⁷ in fear of the Romans and of traditional Jews. They were in danger of developing a "them and us" mentality.

John tells them that God's love is for the whole world and that Jesus is the instrument to bring people back to God.

Contrasts and symbols

*** Light and darkness**

Nicodemus comes to see Jesus at night. In him we can see all seekers, at first in darkness and emerging in the light (19:39). This contrast is a favourite of John's. People who do not know God's love are in darkness. In Jesus, they find light, faithfulness, love.

*** To condemn and to save**

Salvation is offered to us through Jesus because of God's love for us. Condemnation is not the purpose of the Incarnation. We condemn ourselves by turning away from God, choosing to do our own thing, being self-reliant as for example, Adam did, and by rejecting his Son.

*** To believe or not to believe in the name of Jesus**

Another word for "to believe" might be "to place your trust" in God, present to his people through his Son. Our faith is based on a trust relationship with Jesus, the Son of God, and the enormous love between Father and Son, namely, the Spirit.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.



The Most Holy Trinity

6

John 3: 16-18

On the Sunday after Pentecost, the Church celebrates the Feast of the Holy Trinity.

The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is central to our Christian faith, yet it is not explicitly a biblical belief.

During the first centuries the Church sought to clarify her Trinitarian faith, both to deepen her own understanding of the faith and to defend it against the errors that were deforming it. (Catechism of the Catholic Church §250)

This clarification was the work of the early councils, in particular Nicea and Constantinople in the fourth century AD. Although it is a mystery which we may struggle to understand it is nonetheless present to us in our everyday life, in the sign of the cross, in the baptismal formula and familiar prayers such as the "Glory be..":
One God "in three persons equal in majesty, undivided in splendour...ever to be adored" (Preface of this Sunday)

Jesus speaks to Nicodemus

Nicodemus, a common name of the time, is only found in John's gospel. He is a Pharisee, member of the Sanhedrin, a council of 23 judges appointed in every city.

Today's gospel is part of a longer story where Jesus engages and teaches Nicodemus in a dialogue typical of John's gospel (Cf The woman at the well –3rd Sunday in Lent). These dialogues enable the Lord, or John at times, to explain a misunderstanding and develop further the true spiritual meaning of his words.

God loved the world so much

This verse is possibly one of the best known and loved in the Bible.

In Jesus we have the supreme example of God's love. We are affected and changed by it. We are to love, because God loved us first.

Jesus promises fulfilled.

5

In his description of the scene John illustrates how everything that is taking place is a fulfilment of the promises Jesus made to his disciples as he prepared them for his death and subsequent return. (See Farewell Discourses, 13: 33-38 & 14 to 17)

'Peace be with you'

This is a normal middle-eastern greeting which can be translated as 'May God give you everything'. Its close repetition gives it more significance and recalls Jesus' words to the disciples: '*Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you.*' (14:17)



Jesus' return.

The joy of the disciples at seeing Jesus echoes the promise he made them earlier: '*You are sad now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will be full of joy.*' (14:19 and 16.22.)

'Receive the Holy Spirit'.

The promise of an Advocate is also fulfilled as Jesus breathes on the disciples. "I shall ask the Father and he will give you another

Advocate...' (14:16-26)

As John tells us that Jesus breathes new life into the disciples we are reminded of the story of Creation, (Genesis 2:7) and also of Ezekiel (37:9) both telling of the life-giving breath of God.

The commission.

Jesus sends out the disciples to proclaim the message of God's forgiveness (also recorded by the other evangelists. Matthew 28:19 , Luke 24:47 and Mark 16:15.) They will be able to fulfil their tasks now that they are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Since the council of Trent, this power to forgive sins is formally exercised in the sacrament of reconciliation.