

Ascension Sunday 2013 Year C

This Sunday we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. The psalm is one of those called “enthronement psalms,” where Yahweh is acclaimed as sitting on his throne as “great king over all the earth.” Jesus, too, is enthroned: he sits at the right hand of God the Father; see Heb 8:1; 12:2. This is really what is celebrated in this feast.

But Jesus’ Ascension into heaven to sit at the right hand of God his Father of course came only after his painful sacrifice which purified us from our sins and saved us, as stated in Heb 1:3; 10:12. When the second reading for this feast is from Ephesians 1, we hear that when Christ sat at the right hand of God, all things were put under his feet. This reminds us of Ps 110, which says that God told the Messiah to sit at his right hand until all his enemies are put under his feet. This is a psalm which Christ quoted in Mk 12:35-37 as referring to himself, and also at his trial before the Sanhedrin in Mk 14:61-62. It is the psalm which says of the Messiah “you are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” It is quoted several times in the Letter to the Hebrews as referring to the high priesthood of Christ: Heb 5:5-10; 6:17-20; 7:17. In these last passages, there is an eloquent reference to the great suffering of Christ, who cried out loud and made many supplications, who, though being Son, learned obedience through what he suffered, and who through his dolorous Passion was able to ‘penetrate beyond the veil’ into the very presence of God his Father, to intercede on our behalf, as the second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews states. This is an aspect of the Ascension which we might overlook, but it is essential. Christ entered this “sanctuary not made by human hands” not with the blood of bulls and goats as the Jewish high priest did every year, but with his own blood (Heb 9:11-14). This is how he came to sit on his throne at the right hand of God.

So what Christ has done, as the second reading says, is to open up for us “a new and living way” into God’s very presence, and given us great boldness and confidence (“absolute trust”) to approach his “throne of grace,” since Christ, who experienced weakness like us and was tried like us in everything except sin, is a compassionate high priest, Heb 4:14-16.

Christ gave us the Holy Spirit (already from the cross, when he died, according to Jn 19:30). This is the Promise of the Father which his disciples must await at the end of Luke’s gospel. It too comes out of the Christ’s necessary suffering, but the Spirit fills us with power from on high. This gives us the strength to wait for Jesus’ final manifestation, when he returns to take us with him (1 Thes 4:13-18).