

The Ascension of the Lord (A)  
(Acts 1:1-11 / Matthew 28:16-20)  
17.05.2026

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today we celebrate the Ascension of the Risen Lord from the earth into heaven. For his disciples, Jesus' departure was perceived as an absence and was a source of sadness. They felt abandoned, like orphans. Our celebration of this leave-taking feast might lead us to feel a little sad as well. But perhaps things are not as simple as they appear at first sight. Presence and absence are not simple notions, black-and-white realities.

We can be deeply present to someone even when we are physically absent. We can be absent to someone even when we are physically present to them.

There is also the question of the quality of our presence. Our presence can be a blessing or a curse for the people around us. Our presence can dominate, bind and even paralyse others; or, to the contrary, our presence can set them free.

When Jesus was saying farewell to his disciples, he tried to explain to them some of the deep paradoxes in the mystery of presence and absence.

In John 16:7, Jesus tells his disciples that it is better for them that he goes away, because, unless he goes, he will be unable to send his Spirit.

A few verses further on (Jn 16:20-21), Jesus assures his disciples that the heaviness and grief they will feel at his leaving is really the pain of giving birth and that this sorrow will eventually bring them a joy that no one can ever take from them. Yes indeed, presence and absence are not simple clear cut notions.

The departure of Jesus on Ascension Day is an absence that makes possible a greater presence. It marks the beginning of a new era. Without the Ascension of the Risen Lord and gift of the Holy Spirit which will follow, the presence of the Risen Lord would have been limited to a very short moment in the history of the world, some twenty-one centuries ago, and to a very small part of the world: Galilee and Judea of that time. Thanks to the Ascension of the Risen Lord and to the gift of the Holy Spirit, the presence of the Risen Lord has spread to the whole world and throughout the whole of history.

In other words, by ascending into heaven, Christ goes from the "here" of Galilee to presence "everywhere" throughout the whole world. He ceases to limit Himself to one time or one place or one group of people. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, he becomes invisibly present and available to all who wish to be in contact with Him, share in his work and his glory. William Temple, a twentieth-century Archbishop of Canterbury, put it clearly when he wrote (I quote): "The Ascension of Christ is his liberation from all restrictions of time and space. It does not represent his removal from the earth, but his constant presence everywhere on earth. During his earthly ministry, he could only be at one place at a time. If he was in Jerusalem, he was not in Capernaum; if he was in Capernaum, he was not in Jerusalem. But now that he is united with God, he is present wherever God is present; and that is everywhere. Because he is in heaven, he is everywhere on earth; because he is ascended, he is here now". (end of quotation).

Thanks to the Ascension of the Risen Lord and the gift of the Holy Spirit, each one of us can experience the presence of the Risen Lord here and now. We can experience the victory over sin and death he promised to share with us. And so, we see how an absence can be a source of blessing, life and happiness. We see how an absence can be a presence, the source of a greater life. This is true not only for Jesus taking leave of the earth and sending his Spirit; it is also true for each one of our lives.

Let us think of a mother bearing a child in her womb. If she wants her child to live, to grow and become fully human, the mother has to consent to a painful separation with her child, to a painful absence which is the necessary condition for her child to live to the full a life stronger than death, a life victorious over death. We recognize in the act of giving birth an absence which will allow a greater presence, a greater life to be.

One day, the same mother will have to confide her child to a stranger in a nursery, who will help her child to grow in knowledge and social skills. Often the mother will come back home alone with a tear in her eyes. This is another absence for a greater presence, a greater life!

Later on, the same child will leave the family home for college, university or their place of work... This will be another absence for a greater presence, a greater life!

Later on again, the parents will see their child leaving the family home to found his or her own family... Another absence for a greater presence, a greater life!

And one day, for each one of us without exception, death will appear surprisingly! A greater absence indeed, but in truth a birth into eternal life, fullness of life in God's presence and in communion with all our brothers and sisters in humanity! Another absence for a greater presence, fullness of life!

All these absences are manifestations of the mystery of the Ascension in our daily lives. Absences which are in fact necessary steps of growth in view to a greater presence, a fuller experience of life!

May this celebration of the Ascension of the Lord Jesus, be a source of light and hope for our lives! Thanks to his Ascension and to the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Day, the Risen Lord is present to each one of us here and now. He is listening to us! He is speaking to us! He is enjoying our presence! May we enjoy his presence now and for ever! Amen.