

MAY 5TH, 2016: ASCENSION OF THE CHRIST
Acts 1:1-11 Ephesians 1:17-23 Luke 24:45-53

(In some American dioceses, the feast of the Ascension replaces the Seventh Sunday of Easter.)

Those who don't expect Jesus' Parousia anytime soon really can't appreciate the mindset of the community for whom Luke originally composed his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. The two evangelists who preceded Luke – Mark and Matthew – presumed Jesus' Second Coming was still just around the corner, though they wrote more than 40 years after his death and resurrection. As the years went by such a conviction became less and less tenable. How long would Jesus' second and third generation followers hold on to that belief? As it turned out, not for very long.

By the mid-80s, Luke came to the conclusion this deeply longed for event wouldn't happen in his or his readers' lifetime. That seems to be why, among other things, he tries to convince his community that we're in this "Christianity thing" for the long haul. Jesus' Second Coming isn't just around the corner. His treatment of Jesus' ascension logically becomes part of this new theology.

That's the key to appreciating today's three readings. In some sense, because scholars regard the ascension as more theological than historical, we must understand what our sacred authors are trying to convey by writing about it. They're not as much interested in zeroing in on a calendar date as they are in letting us know about the ongoing implications of Jesus' death and resurrection.

This is certainly clear in our Ephesians pericope. The Pauline disciple responsible for the letter theologically regards the risen Jesus as "far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion God put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church" The best way to express this belief is simply to state a theological ascension metaphor: "(God) seated him at his right hand in the heavens."

But it's also important to note that most of our Christian authors, like John the evangelist, regard any ascension of Jesus as a temporary phenomenon. Remember how in chapter 20, John's Jesus talks with Mary Magdalene about "ascending to the Father," leaves her presence, then returns later that evening. It's like telling your spouse, "I'm going over to talk with the neighbors." The presupposition is, "I'll be back later," as was the case with John's Jesus.

This seems also how Luke looked at the event in today's gospel pericope. "As he blessed them he parted from them and was taken up to heaven." Then, as we hear in our first reading – the initial chapter of Luke's second volume – Jesus is back again with his followers for at least 40 more days. Only in the Acts of the Apostles do we have a definite departure of Jesus into heaven.

Luke seems to do this, among other reasons, because of his conviction that Christians are going to live in this long haul depending more and more on the help of the Holy Spirit in their lives. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you," the departing Jesus tells them.

I don't think it's accidental that after Jesus' ascension in Acts, no one is ever "completely" converted to the faith by having a vision of Jesus – not even Paul who, after Jesus appears to him on the Damascus road, still must go to Ananias to complete the process of conversion. Now people are only converted to the faith by encountering other people of faith. Jesus doesn't seem to be around anymore to do the job. If we don't do it, it won't happen. But Luke's also convinced that only the Holy Spirit helps us do it in the way the risen Jesus wants us to do it, especially in the long haul.

MAY 8TH, 2016: SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 7:55-60 Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20 John 17:20-25

One of the things about which I was certain as a child were the events that were going to kick in the moment I'd die. The catechism was black and white on the issue, and, one way or another, our religion teachers constantly reminded us of it.

First, at the moment of death, each person would undergo a "particular judgment." Jesus (or "God") would personally evaluate us on how we'd lived our lives. Three options were on the table: heaven, hell, or purgatory. Though we preferred heaven, we presumed none of us were instantly worthy of such a place. We were simply content to avoid hell and be assigned to purgatory. We were warned we'd have to suffer the same tortures as hell, but unlike hell they'd eventually end – quicker if our friends and relatives said a lot of indulgenced prayers for us or paid to have Masses said for the repose of our souls.

Next, when the world finally ends and the risen Jesus returns in the Parousia, there'll be a "general judgment." Purgatory will be taken off the table. Only heaven and hell will remain. Everyone who ever lived will be judged – even those who already went through a particular judgment. Of course, those who had previously been sent to purgatory will now be sent to heaven to join all the other saints in praising God forever. Such a general judgment. will give an opportunity for everyone to join in the glory and shame of those who had either lived their lives correctly or had really screwed them up. (My belief in such a spectacle started to wane after I sat through my first large high school graduation ceremony.)

Though this two judgment. scenario is tight and tidy, nowhere is it found as such in Scripture.

The earliest Christian belief in what happens after we die is in I Thessalonians 4. Paul states his belief that we simply stay in our graves until the Parousia when Jesus comes to take us with him to heaven. No judgment. seems to happen before Jesus' Second Coming.

Neither Mark nor Matthew seem to have anything in their gospels which would contradict Paul's belief. Only after several generations, when a delayed Parousia becomes a problem, does staying in one's grave for that length of time also become a problem.

That seems to be where Luke – and today's first reading – comes in. Notice what happens as Stephen is dying. "Filled with the Holy Spirit, (he) looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God . . ." Then, at the point of death, he calls out, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit." No grave, no delay. Stephen instantly experiences his "personal Parousia." No reason to have a later judgment. Everything's taken care of at the moment of death.

Scholars point out that John carries Luke's theology one step further, as we hear in today's gospel passage. He believes in "realized eschatology:" in other words, what we're expecting in the future, we already have right here and now. Those who think we're only going to be "one with the Father" in heaven must realize that anyone who is already one with Jesus in his or her present life is already one with the Father in this present life. We don't have to wait until our physical deaths to experience that part of heaven.

It's clear that ideas about the afterlife evolve throughout the Christian Scriptures. Perhaps that might be why it's better to trust in our relationship with the risen Jesus than in our relationship with catechisms. Certainly where I'd put my money – and my life.