

MAY 10TH, 2018: ASCENSION OF JESUS
Acts 1:1-11 Ephesians 1:17-23 Mark 16:15-20

It's far easier simply to say, "Jesus has risen!" than to reflect on the implications of his resurrection. The fact we have four – sometimes contradictory - gospel narratives of the discovery of his empty tomb prove that point. Because of our evangelists' Semitic both/and thought process, each offers us a different dimension and different consequences of that event. Our problem is that we've squeezed these diverse gospel narratives into chronological liturgical readings. That means, because of our Greek either/or thought process, we've "canonized" one of these theologies and left the others behind. We, for instance, overlook that fact there's no definitive ascension of Jesus in either Mark, Matthew, or John. Since we've inserted Luke's ascension theology into our liturgical year, we not only presume that's all there is, we rarely notice the implications Luke's trying to convey in expressing his theology in his unique way.

Among other things, Luke is convinced, in the absence of the historical Jesus, that the Holy Spirit is the force guiding the Christian community. His Jesus couldn't be clearer. Just before he ascends he tells his disciples to expect Pentecost. "In a few days," he says, "you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." In other words, "The Spirit will shortly take my place."

We who faithfully depend on the institutional church to tell us what God wants us to do, have little space for that Spirit in our religious experiences. Growing up Catholic, about the only time we were expected to pray to the Holy Spirit was immediately before we took our school exams. Hopefully the Spirit would remind us what our teachers had taught on various subjects, not enlighten us on what the risen Jesus was telling us to do in our daily lives.

The Pauline disciple who wrote the letter to the Ephesians poetically speaks about the risen Jesus "seated at (God's) right hand in the heavens." Yet he also reminds his readers about the "Spirit of wisdom and revelation" which we received when we first experienced God in our lives. No way we can be other Christs without constantly falling back on that Spirit, whether the risen Jesus is relaxing triumphant in heaven or actively working among us here on earth.

It's important to know that today's gospel pericope was not originally part of Mark's gospel. Even the bishops at the Council of Trent (1545) agreed someone had tacked verses 9-20 onto Mark's gospel long after the evangelist completed it. (By the way, there are Marcan manuscripts with at least two other non-original endings. Most probably the gospel simply ended with verse 8, as disturbing as that is.)

Since Jesus' followers didn't seem to have regarded the Christian Scriptures as divinely inspired until the latter part of the third century, people could "mess around" with those writings and not worry about divine retribution. Mark's original abrupt ending to his gospel – the risen Jesus is simply "out there somewhere" - seems to have provided a made-to-order invitation to those who had problems with the different theologies in other writings. Someone eventually strung those passages together in a way that "made sense;" one that fit their either/or Greek mentality.

It doesn't do much harm to read today's addition (except for those churches whose worship services revolve around handling poisonous snakes.) But these verses should be a reminder that our faith originally wasn't a matter of either/or. If we celebrate today's feast knowing Jesus' ascension was one among several ways to surface the implications of Jesus' resurrection, we're correctly looking at this celebration from a biblical point of view. If, on the other hand, we think our liturgical chronology accurately conveys historical chronology, we'd best sign up for a course in Scripture 101 as soon as possible.

MAY 13TH, 2018: SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 1:15-17, 20a, 20c-26 I John 4:11-16 John 17:11b-19

I often mention that today's John 17 gospel pericope was always proclaimed on a very solemn occasion in one of the seminaries I attended: immediately after priestly ordinations, just before the meal commemorating that happy event. In that non-biblical context, we (men) automatically bought into the introduction the lector gave this passage: "Jesus' prayer for his newly ordained priests." The "them" about whom the gospel Jesus was speaking could only be priests, no one else need apply.

It's difficult for us who grew up with the idea that the Roman Catholic priesthood has always been essential to our faith to admit that particular institution is just as frequently found in Scripture as are electric lights. The priesthood, as we know it, won't evolve until long after the biblical period. It's a shame that a gospel prayer originally intended for all Jesus' followers was eventually limited to just a small portion of those people.

When, during the Last Supper, John's Jesus speaks about those to whom "he gave his word," who he prays "will be kept from the evil one," who he's convinced "are in the world, but not of the world," he's not referring to individuals who have received priestly ordination, but to those who have been baptized, everyone who's determined to carry on his ministry. In a world without clergy and laity, he can't be referring to anyone else.

John's main purpose in this pericope is to remind his community of how unique it is to be a disciple of the risen Jesus. Like himself/herself, they're "new creations." Not only can't they judge themselves by anyone else's standards, they have to be prepared for a ministry unlike any other. Among other things, as other Christs they have to anticipate the same problems the first Christ experienced. They'll frequently find themselves in a world which hates them, simply because they're carrying on his ministry. "As you sent them into the world," he states, "so I sent them into the world." It won't take long to discover they, like Jesus, are committed to a different value system than a lot of the people around them.

Why doesn't he get them quickly out of their misery and take them immediately into heaven? The answer's simple: if they don't hang in there and endure the pain, nothing in this world is ever going to change for the better. The Father didn't rescue him, why should he rescue them? He can only guarantee his community that his care of them will be just as unique as they are.

Luke is also convinced that Jesus' followers are carrying on his ministry. Though those who chose our liturgical readings have conveniently left out Acts' contradictory account of Judas' death, it's still important he be replaced. Luke's convinced the Twelve must be intact when the Spirit arrives on Pentecost. (Notice the next member of the Twelve who dies isn't replaced. Once the Holy Spirit is in charge, we no longer need the Twelve. The community's in the Spirit's hands.)

The exceptional care Jesus has for his followers is driven by one basic principle: "If God so loved us, we also must love one another." The author of I John couldn't be clearer. "God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in them." We have one basic mission in life: to love others.

We who've stratified our world by splitting it between clergy and laity are called by the risen Jesus to get rid of that nonsense and return to his faith. His world is populated only with those who love and those who don't love. If we can't pull that off, we're really not "his." Especially embarrassing for those, I would think, who are the monsignors among us.