

MAY 17 or MAY 20, 2012: ASCENSION OF JESUS

Acts 1:1-11 Ephesians 4:1-11 Mark 16:15-20

One of the most interesting aspects of today's gospel pericope is that these verses were added long after Mark completed his gospel. His work ends in verse 8 with the women running away from the tomb telling nothing to anyone. Even the bishops at the Council of Trent (1545) knew that the various endings (there are at least three!) which were eventually tucked in after verse 8 couldn't be attributed to the original evangelist.

Why were they added? Why couldn't later Christians be content with Mark's insight that the risen Jesus is simply "out there somewhere?"

It seems some scribes read more than Mark's gospel, writings which, like Luke, included ascensions, or, like Matthew, narrated special "commissions" for the disciples, or, like Acts, described a miraculous snake handling. Thinking it was their job to get Mark in line with other authors of the Christian Scriptures, these well-meaning scribes constructed endings for the first evangelist which coincided with those other writings.

One of the most difficult things for modern (Western) readers of Scripture to appreciate is that our sacred authors didn't think the way we think. It isn't that they thought about different things; something went on their minds when they were thinking that doesn't go on in most of ours. They were Semitic, not Greek thinkers. We, who were trained in Greek thought from childhood, analyze whatever we're thinking about. We mentally tear it apart, trying to get to an either/or statement about it. Semites, on the other hand, synthesize. They try to get as many aspects or dimensions of the thing in their minds at the same time - even contradictory aspects or dimensions. They judge their thought process a success when they can come up with a both/and statement - especially when they're thinking about Yahweh or Jesus. They presumed both are too complicated to analyze. Those who do so are always leaving something out.

That's why Semitic thinking authors Luke and John can speak of an ascension, and Matthew and Mark don't. Luke can make it a permanent ascension and John teaches it's temporary. They're not writing history, they're conveying theology. They're more concerned with the meaning of what happened, then in exactly narrating the facts of what happened. Without meaning, facts are worthless.

Perhaps today's passage from Ephesians might be our most important reading. The disciple of Paul who wrote it believes it's very important for his community to understand the implications of being called to carry on the ministry of the risen Jesus. As he mentions, we follow someone who both ascended and descended, someone who was concerned for the entire universe, a concern he passes on to all who work daily at being "other Christs." We, like Jesus, are commissioned to "fill all things."

If that's our mission, it's essential we reflect on the gifts we've been given by him/her. It's only when each of us employs those gifts to the best of our ability that we "build up the body of Christ," always trying to attain "the full stature of Christ."

The author presumes no one will use his or her gifts in exactly the same way. Paul clearly wrote about that diversity of the Spirit in I Corinthians. It's never a matter of either/or; it's always both/and. If the risen Jesus is complicated, then the risen Jesus' disciples are also complicated.

It might be a good idea while today's readings are being proclaimed to look around. Notice all who are hearing these words. Appreciate how different they are from you and me, how the Spirit has gifted them in unique ways, ways we're not blessed with. Then thank God that there are contradictions in our Scriptures. Without them we'd never be certain we're looking at God, or ourselves in the right way.

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MAY 20, 2012: SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

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

Since many of us don't know the distinguishing characteristics of a biblical disciple, an apostle, or the Twelve, we probably won't understand the meaning of today's first reading.

In the Christian Scriptures, a disciple is anyone - man or woman - who follows Jesus. Luke, in Acts, even employs the feminine of the Greek word. An apostle is a disciple sent out on a specific mission. Paul of Tarsus often refers to himself as an apostle. The Twelve are unique. They seem to be the twelve men (probably apostles) whom the historical Jesus chose to accompany him during his itinerant preaching ministry.

Any Jew, hearing the number 12, automatically thinks of the twelve tribes of Israel. Every one of them belongs to one of those tribes. Originally the twelve were the twelve sons of Jacob, some of the patriarchs who gave us Judaism. Scholars believe Jesus employed the Twelve as an outward sign of his conviction that the reform he was preaching applied equally to all Jews, not just those who belonged to the two prestigious tribes of his day and age - Judah and Benjamin - or whose ancestors had been among those Israelites who returned from the Babylonian Exile. People in his audiences who were from the tribe of Naphtali or Dan were just as important as a priest or descendant of David. The Twelve were a clear symbol of the inclusivity Jesus preached and practiced. There couldn't be any women among them because they represented Jacob's twelve sons. Had there been six men and six women, all symbolism would have gone out the window.

Because the evangelists include different names in the three lists of the Twelve, we presume the "group" was more important than its individual members. (When teaching about the Twelve, I ask my classes to name the Three Stooges. Though they come up with six names, each of the six is still a member of the Three Stooges.) Of course, the Twelve only make sense when you're dealing with Jews. That seems to be why John never names them. By the end of the first century he appears to have given up on converting Jews. The Gentile Christians for whom he wrote wouldn't have appreciated the inclusivity of the twelve tribe symbolism.

But on the other hand, this symbolism seems to be why it's important for Luke to get the number back to twelve before the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's arrival will not only gift them with the ability to reach out to all people (the gift of tongues), it will also operate from the premise that this new, spirit-filled community is a gathering of equals.

The author of I John couldn't agree more. For him, the great leveling force which the Spirit brings arises first from the love God has for us, then from the love we have for God and those around us. "God is love," he writes, "and those who remain in love remain in God and God in them." There can be no exclusivity when love is involved.

Notice how John's Jesus prays for his community during the Last Supper. He presumes they're a unique group of people, just as he's unique. His passion for unity logically comes to the fore. "Holy Father," he prays, "keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are one." If they're to carry on his ministry, they must mirror his mindset, a mindset which not only bugged many around him, it eventually led to his death. "I gave them you word, and the world hated them, because they do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world."

As Jesus' followers, we'd best surface the "things" about which he was deeply concerned. Among other things, we should be the most inclusive people on this earth.