

MAY 24, 2020: SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 1:12-14 I Peter 4:13-16 John 17:1-11a

Today's liturgical readings seem to have been chosen precisely to prepare us for next Sunday's feast of Pentecost.

Among other things, our Christian sacred authors want their readers to understand that Jesus of Nazareth not only expects his followers to carry on his ministry, but that they're actually doing so.

That's why, for instance, Luke, in our Acts pericope, names many of the individuals who will be in Jerusalem's upper room when the Spirit comes. It's a scene similar to the ending of the Broadway musical and movie 1776, when the names of all the Declaration of Independence's signers are dramatically read off. In this case, these are the people who will initially make up the biblical church; a community which comes into existence only when the Holy Spirit arrives. (It's important to note that Luke dares include Mary and "some women" in that list!) Along with Paul of Tarsus and a few others, they'll continue Jesus' ministry throughout the Acts of the Apostles.

That's also why, during John's last supper narrative, Jesus spends a lot of time speaking about and to "those whom you (the Father) gave me out of the world." They're a unique group of people. It's only through them that the risen Jesus can expect to be "glorified."

John's Jesus especially reflects on the fact that the "words you (the Father) gave to me I have given to them, and they accepted them and truly understood that I came from you and have believed that you sent me." It's up to them to "accomplish the work" God initially entrusted to the historical Jesus, to pass the words they received from him to others, to carry on his ministry.

After my early years of Catholic education, I thought the primary reason I was on this earth was simply to get into heaven when I died. It never occurred to me that I was expected to carry on Jesus' work. If anyone was to do that, it was the priests and bishops. That idea was reinforced when I was in the seminary. Today's gospel pericope, for instance, was always proclaimed in one of my seminaries before the special meal held for and with the newly ordained priests, introduced by the reader as "Jesus' prayer for his priests." Back then – in the early 1960s - no one seemed to realize that when John wrote his gospel there were no priests as we know them today. That development most probably wouldn't take place for another century. In those unique days before the Christian community was split into clergy and laity, this prayer was said for *all* Jesus' followers; each of his disciples was expected to be another Christ.

No wonder the unknown author of I Peter insists that "no one among you be made to suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as an intriguer." (Though I'm not too certain what an "intriguer" is, I think it might have something to do with chancery offices!) According to the sacred author, we're not to be such sinful people because that behavior would stop us from getting into heaven but because such actions would hinder us from carrying on Jesus' ministry. We're the people who stand out in this world, working "in the name of Christ."

Perhaps today especially it might be good to recall that old axiom attributed to Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel always, and if necessary, use words!" If we're serious about being other Christs, then Jesus' priorities must be our priorities, his lifestyle, our lifestyle. But before anything else, we have to actually "keep the word" we proclaim. How can we palm it off on someone else and still be glorifying Jesus?

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MAY 21 or 24, 2020: ASCENSION OF THE LORD

Acts 1:1-11 Ephesians 1:17-23 Matthew 28:16-20

It's clear from today's first and third readings that our four evangelists often contradict one another, even about things we believe essential to our faith. Because of our liturgical calendar, we Catholics presume Jesus died on Good Friday, rose on Easter Sunday, ascended to heaven 40 days later, and sent the Spirit 10 days after that. Few of us realize that this chronology is only a re-enactment of Luke's theology, a theology every other evangelist contradicts.

Probably many of us will hear a homily today in which the speaker concentrates on Jesus' gospel words about being with us "until the end of the age," a promise, the homilist tells us, Jesus makes immediately before he ascends into heaven. Few priests or deacons notice today's gospel is from Matthew, an evangelist who never speaks about an ascension! Matthew's gospel ends where today's pericope ends. Matthew's risen Jesus is still "out there somewhere," appearing where and to whom he/she wishes, especially in our daily lives. Unlike Luke, Matthew's Jesus doesn't have a heavenly zip code.

For our sacred authors, Jesus' risen existence isn't as black and white as many of us presume. The Pauline disciple responsible for the letter to the Ephesians, for instance, feels comfortable conceiving of a glorified Christ "seated at God's right hand in the heavens, far above every principality, authority, power and dominion . . ." In some sense, each writer zeros in on a particular aspect of the risen Jesus, and leaves others in the background.

One of the reasons Luke has Jesus definitively ascend revolves around his conviction that the risen Jesus' Spirit is now guiding the church. In his theology, we should be anticipating encounters with that Spirit, not with the actual risen Jesus. Luke seems to believe those encounters best take place when the Christ is taken out of the picture; thus his idea of a definitive resurrection.

In my own experience as a minister, I prefer the "he/she's still here" theology of the other three evangelists.

We usually presume the Spirit is going to communicate with us through our minds, not through the actual individuals with whom we come face to face in our daily lives. A risen Jesus residing in heaven is often conceived of as simply a "resuscitated Jesus:" Jesus as he was during his earthly ministry, simply brought back to life after his death on the cross. We forget the basic difference between resuscitation and biblical resurrection.

As I often remind you, a resurrected Jesus is, in Paul's words, a "new creation." That unique individual is no longer a first century CE free Jewish man. We know from Galatians 3 that the Apostle is convinced such a person is as much a slave as free, a Gentile as a Jew, and a woman as a man. I believe it's far more difficult to surface the risen Jesus in the people we encounter in our daily lives than it is to encounter Jesus' Spirit in the inspired thoughts which flash through our minds.

Though the Spirit certainly helps us know what to do in concrete situations, surfacing the risen Jesus in concrete individuals helps us build the body of Christ among us. I have no problem conceiving of Jesus being rewarded by the Father for dying for us, as long as that reward doesn't make him/her more distant from us.

Today's feast might be a reason why we should have included one or more inspired books in our collection of early Christian writings. Our sacred authors believed there'd always be "another way" of looking at our faith, a way different from their own. If that's true, after 2,000 years we have a perspective on the faith those first century writers simply didn't have.

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May 31, 2020: PENTECOST

Acts 2:1-11 I Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13 John 20:19-23

If you're participating in a Bible Trivia contest, how would you answer the question, "On what day did the Holy Spirit come down on Jesus' disciples?"

The correct answer is, "I don't know." At least two different dates are given in today's liturgical Scriptures alone. In our Acts passage, Luke tells us it was on the Jewish feast of Pentecost – seven weeks after Passover; while John puts the event on Easter Sunday night – several days after Passover. You have no choice but to pay your money and take your pick.

Those who first collected our Christian sacred writings and eventually gathered them into one book couldn't have appreciated our problem. Falling back on their Semitic "both/and" way of thinking, they expected to find such contradictions. More concerned with the implications of our faith than with exact historical happenings, they often chose a date that would convey the meaning of a particular event, ignoring the actual calendar day that event took place. That's certainly why Luke puts the Holy Spirit event on Pentecost.

The Jewish feast of "Weeks" - or Pentecost - commemorates the Israelites entering into a covenant with Yahweh on Mt. Sinai. It's that agreement which formally creates the Chosen People. No longer just a ragtag band of runaway slaves, they're now Yahweh's people.

In a similar way, the arrival of the Holy Spirit transforms Jesus' disciples into the new people of God, committed to carrying on his ministry. This seems to be why Luke makes a big thing out of the many foreign pilgrims understanding the disciples' message in their native tongues. Throughout Acts, with the Spirit's help, these followers are going to spread Jesus' message to the "ends of the earth."

John, on the other hand, picks Easter Sunday night as the time for the Spirit's arrival because of his conviction that the Spirit is an integral part of Jesus' (and our) dying and rising, something we especially demonstrate in our forgiveness of others.

But there are many more scriptural implications of the Spirit than just these two. Paul shows that in our I Corinthians pericope. For the Apostle, it's precisely the risen Jesus' Spirit which provides us with the gifts that mold us into the Body of Christ. "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit," he writes, ". . . who produces all of them in everyone." The key insight is his well-known teaching: "As the body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ." If the Spirit doesn't gift each of Jesus' followers in a unique way, the risen Jesus would be "bodiless." No one Christian can completely convey Christ's image. It takes all of us to pull that off, each one employing the gifts the Spirit's given him or her.

Paul's Corinthian experience of the Spirit's gifts creating conflicts in the church dovetails with Luke's Pentecost images of the Spirit: wind, noise and fire. Each one not only causes confusion, but also creates situations we'd prefer to avoid. Yet if we're serious about being the Body of Christ, we have to be willing to accept and deal with such problems, a sign we accept the Spirit's gifts.

Perhaps the most important line in today's three readings is Paul's remark, "To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit." When we refuse to put up with the wind, noise and fire which accompany the Spirit in our lives, we're also refusing to do the good which comes from being the Body of Christ.

If we have lots of peace and tranquility in our particular church, we're probably squelching the Spirit.