

MAY 25, 2014: SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 8:5-8, 14-17 I Peter 3:15-18 John 14:15-21

It's always interesting when our Sunday readings present us with different theologies.

This especially creates problems for us Greek thinkers: people who've been trained to analyze whatever we're thinking about. We tear it mentally apart, zeroing in on just one dimension at a time, filtering it through our brains with little or no regard for its other dimensions, all the time trying to come up with an either/or conclusion about the object on which we're concentrating. One of my philosophy profs once remarked that we in first world countries have a high standard of living precisely because we think Greek. The classic Greek philosophers who developed this analytic thinking process would be proud of us.

But this way of thinking creates a huge difficulty for us when we read and study Scripture. Our sacred authors didn't think Greek; they thought "semitically." Instead of analyzing, Semites synthesize. They don't mentally tear apart the object of their thought; they try to bring together as many of its aspects in their minds as they possibly can at one time, even contradictory aspects. The end result of this process is to surface as many both/and statements about something as they can conjure up. Perhaps the best proponent of Semitic thought is Tevye, the hero of *Fiddler on the Roof*, who's best known line is, "But on the other hand . . ." There's always "another hand" for our biblical authors, another way of looking at every person, idea and situation they explore.

This is especially true today when Luke and John treat the Holy Spirit.

Though the role of the Spirit was greatly reduced once the church became "institutionalized," that wasn't the case in the early Christian community. The unknown author of I Peter emphasizes the Spirit's significance in today's second reading. "Put to death in the flesh," he writes, "he (Jesus) was brought to life in the Spirit." The author's convinced that it's only through the work of the Spirit that we experience the risen Jesus in our lives. The Spirit's constant presence is essential. But how do we get that Spirit?

Luke, in our Acts pericope, believes for that to happen there must be some tie-in with the "apostles," with those who are the original "witnesses" to Jesus' death and resurrection. Only when Peter and John come up to Samaria do Philip's recently baptized converts "receive the Holy Spirit."

On the other hand, John is certain the Spirit's arrival has nothing to do with someone connecting to an authority system. For him, this essential Christian phenomenon simply depends on whether or not we love Jesus and keep his commandments. It's at that point that we receive ". . . another Advocate . . . the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept . . ." The Spirit isn't mediated by anyone except the risen Jesus. The Spirit arrives in our lives because of our relationship with Jesus and those around us, not because of our relationship with an institution.

We're hearing two opposing theologies today. As Greek-thinkers we're committed to finding out which is right and which is wrong. Yet in our analytic quest to discover the "truth," we can never forget that once we open our Bibles, we're dealing with Semitic-thinking theologians, inspired writers who aren't concerned with answering such questions. They'd cringe if they ever found out we're reading their books simply to come up with either/or conclusions that we can fit into our catechisms.

Our sacred authors believe that the Spirit's so deeply a part of our faith experience that no one theology can give us all the answers. If they could live their faith within that open frame of mind, why can't we?

MAY 29 or JUNE 1, 2014: THE ASCENSION
Acts 1:1-11 Ephesians 1:17-23 Matthew 28:16-20

When it comes to celebrating Jesus' ascension, we must return to what I said last week about our Semitic-thinking sacred authors. We have a first reading today which describes in detail Jesus' ascent into heaven, accompanied by a gospel which presumes no such event took place.

Fr. Richard McBrien once remarked that some of his Notre Dame undergraduates believe everyone who ever lived before they were born lived at the same time and knew one another. I'm afraid some of us believe the same thing about the people who gave us our Christian Scriptures. We have no idea when they lived or who knew whom.

To start with, scholars are convinced Luke, the author of Acts, never read Matthew's gospel, nor did Matthew know anything about Luke's two-volume work. Though each had a copy of Mark's gospel in front of him, and both had access to a now-lost collection of Jesus' sayings (called the "Q"), Matthew and Luke weren't familiar with one another. Each developed a unique theology about the presence of the risen Jesus and the workings of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew, probably writing in the late 70s, is convinced the risen Jesus is "with (us) always, until the end of the ages." I've heard well-intentioned homilists inform their audiences that today's mountain-top narrative took place on Jerusalem's Mount of Olives, immediately before Jesus ascends into heaven. They overlooked the fact that Matthew tells us, "The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them." Galilee is at least 50 to 70 miles north of the Mount of Olives. They also forget that Matthew ends his gospel with this pericope. There's no ascension after Jesus proclaims his continued presence in the community. The evangelist presumes the risen Jesus is still among us in the same way he/she was before he met with his followers on that unnamed Galilean mountain, still guiding us along the paths he wants our faith in him to take.

Luke, on the other hand, writing in the mid-80s, believes it's through the work of the Spirit that the mission of the risen Jesus is carried on. His Jesus spends 40 days after his resurrection instructing his followers about the "kingdom of God," insists they remain in Jerusalem another 10 days to receive the Holy Spirit, sets out a geographic roadmap for evangelizing others, then ascends into heaven. From this point, the Spirit is in charge. No longer will anyone receive teachings about God's kingdom directly from Jesus. Converts to the faith will only learn about God's effective presence in their everyday lives from other humans who have been guided in their ministry by the Spirit. Literally step by step, Jesus' disciples will witness to his death and resurrection "in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts ends when Paul finally reaches those "ends of earth:" Rome.) Throughout Acts it's the Spirit who guides where Jesus' followers go and to whom they preach.

But Christian authors who speak about Jesus "ascending" don't always use that term literally. The Pauline disciple, for instance, responsible for Ephesians employs "ascension imagery" to convey his belief that the risen Jesus is fundamentally different from the historical Jesus. As a new creation Jesus is God's equal, "seated at God's right hand in the heavens, far above every . . . name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come." This Galilean carpenter has become Yahweh.

In the long run, it really doesn't matter whether the risen Jesus has changed his/her ZIP code or not. What matters for our sacred authors is that by dying and rising with Jesus, we've fundamentally changed. Through his Spirit we've become one with him – even if our ZIP codes never change.