

Ascension Day (Year C)

Now and again, we have pondered about issues concerning puzzles in the Gospels, inconsistencies and even contradictions which cause those of a fundamentalist persuasion to twist themselves into impossible contortions while jumping through myriad hoops to explain how the Scriptures are nevertheless, utterly true. The truth fundamentalists seek to defend is a rigid concept, quite out of kilter with how we live our lives and understand our world. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, a body established and appointed by the Papacy, has described fundamentalism as "intellectual suicide". We are not fundamentalists. We believe, heart and soul, that the Bible is true. It is the Word of God. But God deals with us like grown ups. And truth in a grown up world is a complex issue. It is not simply a matter of what actually happened.

Today we have heard two passages of Scripture which describe Jesus' departure from the apostles. Both are the word of God and therefore both are true. As it happens they are both written by the same author whom we know as Luke.

In the first one, the Gospel account, he tells us that Jesus ascended into heaven, from Bethany just outside Jerusalem, having told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit. He blesses them and is carried to heaven. They go off rejoicing and pray in the Temple continually. And so the Gospel ends, appropriately with a blessing and a departure. It had begun, twenty four chapters earlier, in the Temple, with the promise of an arrival - that of John the Baptist, announced by Gabriel to Zechariah, but without a blessing. Zechariah, the old priest was struck dumb and could not pronounce the blessing over the people when he had finished offering incense that mystical evening.

This beautiful balance, arrival but no blessing; departure and blessing, shows us that Luke knew what he was doing. He is an artist in words. He has thought deeply about the way he tells his story.

So the first account of Jesus departure happens on Easter Day. It is a long day. The women went to the tomb and encountered angels. Peter went and saw only the burial cloths and he left amazed. Two disciples had fled the city in heart break and had encountered a stranger who knew nothing of the causes of their desolation but who made their hearts burn as he interpreted the Scriptures to show how Christ had to suffer and so enter his glory. When they arrived at their destination they press him to stay and, at the breaking of bread they recognise him, though he is gone from their sight. The first mass has been celebrated. They hurry back and learn that the Lord has appeared to Simon. Then the Lord himself is with them, there in the room - and some of them doubt and all are alarmed. He eats fish in front of them to show he is not a ghost. He teaches

them and then they go to Bethany and he departs to glory. What a day!

Luke has ended his Gospel brilliantly. Perfect balance. a departure into the sunset. And a "hang on - what comes next?" Every soap ends with a "?" There is unfinished business and the writers and producers hope that the "?" is big enough for us to need to tune in the following day, week, after the adverts, whatever. The disciples are rejoicing but waiting. What is to happen next? End of volume 1.

Our first reading ended the waiting. the new episode begins. And we hear:

"For forty days he had continued to appear to them and tell them about the Kingdom of God".

Pardon. "For forty days..." But when he ended his Gospel Luke appeared to say he went off on that Easter Day. Fundamentalists beware. If truth is a matter of what really happened, they cannot both have happened. He cannot have departed **finally** twice.

It is not only those of a fundamental persuasion who encounter problems here. I have read in learned studies that Luke, when he wrote his Gospel believed that Jesus had departed on the day of his Resurrection but then new research gave him a different perspective when he started writing the Acts of the Apostles. A different form of contortion.

You will have noticed how in many modern episodic dramas, written or performed, the start of the following episode has shifted the ground from the situation at the end of the previous one. The water up to the neck of our unhappy hero at the end of episode 1 is at his waist at the start of episode 2! We consider that poor technique. Luke is not so ill refined.

I think it fair to presume that Luke had no problem with what he had written. He is a clever man. He will have been aware of the discrepancy - and it does not bother him. As far as he is concerned both descriptions are true.

He was not part of the apostolic group. He like the Mark and Matthew (John is a much more complex case) is a second generation follower of Jesus. He is a disciple of the disciples. Different stories have come to him and he selects from them for his purpose - to proclaim Jesus is Lord. He has heard that Jesus departed on the day of Resurrection and he has heard stories of Jesus' many appearances. He is happy to tell us both. And he does so in clever literally style. He ends his Gospel in an appropriate way, but with some loose threads to entice us to anticipate, to want to read, the next story. He then begins from a different perspective. Jesus with the disciples forty days - forty is a number which

resonates - forty years before entry into the Promised Land; forty days of fasting before Jesus begins his ministry. Luke is preparing the reader/listener for something new - a new beginning after a time of preparation, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, after fifty days, to inaugurate the Church in power.

Luke and the ancient world did not see the issue as we see it. We have the problem, We are concerned with wanting to know what happened. Truth is getting the answer to that question right. Luke and his contemporaries did not share that concern.. They knew that telling the truth is much more subtle, more complex, more intriguing than trying bluntly to say: this is how it was. Luke wants to develop the Christology of the story and he wants to tell the story well. Theology and literary style also have a bearing on what is true.