



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES I

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE AND ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Lesson 19 Commentary Luke 24
Lesson 20 Questions Acts 1 - 2

VICTORY FOR ETERNITY Luke 24

For weeks now we have been looking at the gospel of Luke; the image of Jesus that emerges has well-defined characteristics and marvelous consistency. We have seen the joy that His presence brings, the choices called forth by this Person who was set “for the fall and for the rise of many in Israel.” We have seen His tenderness and mercy, His eagerness to forgive, His attentiveness to children, women, sinners and the poor.

Last week, as we looked at the Passion Narrative, we noticed that Luke alone gives us three of the quotations we know as the seven last words of Jesus:”

“Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.”

“This day you will be with me in Paradise.”

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

As one writer points out,

The peculiarities of Luke’s passion account give us a veritable thumb-nail description of his theology and personality. He is interested in Jesus as a Last Supper model of humility as John was, with whom he shares

other concepts as well. He visualizes a Church-strengthening role for Peter. He is very interested in Jerusalem as the necessary culmination of Jesus’ ministry. He has special knowledge of some of the details of the Passion. He evinces an interest in the women who appear in the Passion story. He is intent on underlining Jesus’ innocence, declared repeatedly by Roman characters. He is, above all, a man of great gentleness and mercy.

It is this same Jesus who is shown to us “on the first day of the week.” The vision is unexpected! Luke shows us the women going to the tomb, their vision of angels, the apostles’ refusal to believe their tale, Peter’s visit to the tomb and his consequent “amazement,” the journey of the discouraged men on their way from Jerusalem, “Jesus’ appearance to the Eleven (having, at some point between, “appeared to Simon”), His missioning of the apostles and His ascension—all taking place on the day we call Easter!

When we read of these events in the four gospels, we are surprised to see differences in who came to the tomb, what they saw, what holy women came to see to the body’s anointing, the

appearance of Jesus to various ones. What can explain this?

Fr. Jerome Kodell points out, “These discrepancies have arisen because of word-of-mouth transmission. The fact that they have not been ironed out into a smooth story witnesses to the authenticity of the experience behind them. The witnesses were convinced of what they had seen and heard and felt, and had no concern for editing the proclamations.”

What was the nature of this body that appears? According to Luke and John, it is tangible enough to be touched and handled, yet it is clearly ephemeral enough to defy boundaries of locked doors, to appear and disappear at will; something makes it hard for the disciples to recognize the master: “They dared not ask who it was, because they knew it was Jesus.” Neither Mary Magdalene nor the disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized Him until He chose to reveal Himself. How do we deal with this section of the Gospel?

(What follows is quoted or summarized from Fr. Raymond Brown’s book, The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus.)

The essence of the resurrection experience is Jesus’ victory over death. The problem we sense is the aptness of our language to describe the victory.

Liberals, whose sympathy leans toward divesting Christianity of something so “anti-quoted” as the imagery of a dead body coming to life, simply explain away the notion of bodily resurrection.

Fundamentalists, who may have a problem distinguishing between a truth and its formulation, are inclined to suppose that questioning resurrection language represents a loss of faith in Jesus’ triumph over death.

Responsible Catholic scholarship puts its efforts toward discovering the real intent of the language and to see if it is still conveyed by the ancient formulas. Neither “what we’ve always said,” nor what modern man finds it convenient to say is to be determinative. Our generation must be obedient, as were our predecessors, to what God has chosen to do in Jesus; we cannot impose upon the picture what we think God should have done!

As Brown points out in a footnote (P. 85):

Many Christians today see only two possibilities: either one affirms a corporeal resurrection so physical that the risen Jesus was just as tangible as He was during His lifetime; or one denies the corporeal resurrection and reduces the appearances to an internal awareness of Jesus’ spiritual victory. However, there is a middle ground, namely a corporeal resurrection in which the risen body is transformed to the eschatological sphere, no longer bound by space and time—a body that no longer has all the natural or physical characteristics that marked its temporal existence.

In the early Christian communities (I Thessalonians for example, was written 20 years after the resurrection event), resurrection was not narrated but proclaimed. Luke’s gospel witnesses to this, e.g. in 24:34: “The Lord has been raised.” Note the sequence of events in the most specific of the early proclamations: (Paul’s letter to I Corinthians 15:3-8)

“For I transmitted to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures: and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures; and that he appeared; to Cephas, then to the Twelve; and then he appeared to more than 500 brethren at one time, of whom most remain alive until now, though some have fallen asleep. And then he appeared: to James,

then to all the Apostles: last of all, as to one irregularly born, he appeared to me.”

In later Gospel narratives (Luke 24:39) Jesus speaks of His flesh and bones, invites His apostles to handle Him, eats fish in their presence. In John 20:27, Thomas is invited to put his hands in the side of the risen Jesus. Do we accuse the evangelists of falsehood if we raise questions about the kind of body the risen Jesus has? No; they are simply emphasizing the corporeal body that shows the continuity between the earthly and the risen Jesus. (See Paul’s distinction in I Corinthians 15:44, between a natural body and an immortal body.)

Post-resurrectional confession is not “We have seen Jesus,” but “We have seen the Lord” (John 20:18,26; 21,7; Luke 24-34). It is insight, not just sight, that is involved. The categories of space and time, the categories of ordinary human experience, when we use it to describe the eschatological: “Seeing” and “speaking” supply us with a language that is only analogous. To quote again a footnote from Brown:

Pope Paul VI alluded to this difficulty in conceptualizing in an important address on the resurrection delivered April 5, 1972: “Jesus rose again in the same body he had taken from the Blessed Virgin, but in new conditions, vivified by a new and immortal animation, which imposes on Christ’s flesh the laws and energies of the Spirit This new reality.... is so far above our capacities of knowledge and even of imagination, that it is necessary to make room for it in our minds through faith.”

As the last event of Luke’s gospel, we must mention “the ascension,” which Luke suggests takes place on Easter itself, though the same Luke speaks in Acts of the same event taking place “after 40 days.” Again, we are dealing with categories of time, space and speech that is beyond normal perception of these phenomena.

What are the consequences of our believing or not believing that the body of Jesus was raised up? The question relates to our whole understanding of our relationship to our world. To quote Brown’s conclusion:

From a critical study of the biblical evidence, I would judge that Christians can and indeed should continue to speak of a bodily resurrection of Jesus. Our earliest ancestors in the faith proclaimed a bodily resurrection in the sense that they did not think that Jesus’ body had corrupted in the tomb. However, and this is equally important, Jesus’ risen body was no longer a body as we know bodies, bound by the dimensions of space and time. It is best to follow Paul’s description of risen bodies as spiritual, not natural or physical. Small wonder that he speaks of a mystery! In our fidelity to proclaim the bodily resurrection of Jesus, we should never become so defensively governed by the apologetics that we do not do justice to this element of transformation and mystery. Christian truth is best served when equal justice is done to the element of continuity implied in bodily resurrection and to the element of eschatological transformation.

The understanding that the resurrection was bodily in the sense that Jesus’ body did not corrupt in a tomb has important theological implications. The resurrection of Jesus was remembered with such emphasis in the Church because it explained what God had done for men. Through the resurrection men came to believe in God in a new way; mankind’s relationship to God was changed; a whole new vision of God and His intention for us was made possible; the whole flow of time and history was redirected.

Nevertheless, a stress on the bodily resurrection keeps us from defining this resurrection solely in terms of what God has done for men. The resurrection was and remains, first of all, what God has done for Jesus. It was not an evolution in human consciousness, nor was it the disci-

ples' brilliant insight into the meaning of the crucifixion—no, it was the sovereign action of God glorifying Jesus of Nazareth. Only because God has done this for His Son are new possibilities opened for His many human children who have come to believe in what He has done.

Luke puts together in his last chapter, events which in reality stretch over a long period of time:

the empty tomb, the apparitions, the sending of the Apostles, the promise of the Spirit, the breaking of the bread, the going up to heaven, forever. For in this mystery on this day, in this city, are realized all the Scriptures concerning salvation (Luke 24:24, 27, 44).

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QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 20
Acts 1 - 2

Day 1 Read the Notes. Share with the group the sentence or paragraph that was the best for you.

Day 2 Read Acts 1:1-5.

- a. In Acts 1:1-2, how does Luke summarize Jesus' public ministry?

- b. How was the Holy Spirit involved?

- c. After the resurrection, what were His activities with them?

- d. What do you understand by "baptism of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5)? (Read Acts 11:15-16, Matthew 3:11.)

Day 3 Read Acts 1:6-12.

- a. Again, whom does Jesus promise as another Divine Teacher?

- b. How far does He predict their witnessing about Him?

- c. What does this account mean for you?

Day 4 Read Acts 1:13-15.

- a. Who were "the Church" that collected in the same upper room as the Last Supper?

- b. Read Acts 1:15-26. What was the first official act of Peter as head of the Church gathered there?

- c. How has this succession of an Apostle been carried down in the Church during the centuries?

Day 5 Read Acts 2:1-13, Luke 3:16.

- a. A crowd gathered after the great wind. What supernatural evidence did they hear?

- b. Read 1 Corinthians 14:20-22. Why does God give this gift, at times, to some in the Church?

- c. Read Peter's speech to the crowd (Acts 2:14-36). Quote one sentence or so that impressed you.

Day 6 Read Acts 2:37-47.

- a. Did Peter's speech have good results? What did it accomplish?

- b. Was this from a talent in Peter?

- c. How much of verse 42 is in the Church today?

- d. Are verses 44-45 in the Church today?

- e. What did earlier Christians practice daily?

- f. How has this account impressed you?