

WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Jn. 20:19-23. (R1) Acts 2:1-11. (R2) 1 Cor. 12:3-7, 12-13.

The reading from Acts puts the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost day; the Gospel puts it on Easter day. Originally the gift of the Spirit was not associated with a single occasion, but was a regular feature of the resurrection appearances.

Whatever the historical fact, the giving of the Spirit caused everything to fall into place regarding Jesus. "No one can say: 'Jesus is Lord,' except in the Holy Spirit" (R2).

We generally do not understand things until they have happened and gone. Kierkegaard once said, philosophers un-

derstand history backwards. I think he meant that history is seen rightly from hindsight. Only after Jesus had lived, died, risen from the dead and sent the Spirit did His followers realize that "Jesus is Lord." The Roman emperor no longer deserved the title of Kyrios, Lord. Jesus alone is Lord. His resurrection conquered the loneliness of purposeless living and the death ending all lives. Christians, as a result, celebrated — sang, lived, loved, thanked God.

Avery Dulles wrote that "measured by the standard of von Ranke, our four Gospels are far from historical sources. They are not easily traceable to eyewitnesses. The authors make no pretense to impartiality. The diversities in their gospels clearly show that they did not aim at photographic accuracy." (*Apologetics and the Biblical Christ*, p. 31).

The Gospels are confessional documents and speak only to believers or potential believers. They do not present Jesus "according to the flesh," but as seen in the light of the Spirit. Only to men earnestly seeking God will the Gospels yield their full message.

How then can we be sure that the picture of Jesus proposed to us in the New Testament is not a mere projection of some human

religious ideal? We can be sure, because—

In the first place, the New Testament unquestionably reflects the way in which Jesus was understood by the band of His own disciples. There are variations in the way in which individual incidents are narrated. But the whole biblical testimony converges to give us a single vision of Christ. There are many theologies in the New Testament but only one faith. Many spoke, but each heard them speaking in his own tongue (R1). In the diversity of expression there is a unity of impression.

Secondly, the New Testament faith about Jesus is proclaimed with stoutest conviction. The authors never write like philosophers groping for the final answer, nor is there ever doubt in their language. They transmit their message as something that had been manifested to them with blinding clarity — by the Spirit!

Thirdly, the New Testament doctrine about Christ is utterly novel. Nothing in Jewish tradition — the tradition in which Peter, Paul, John, Mark and Matthew were reared — would have predisposed them to accept what they proclaimed. Before becoming Christians, they would have shrunk in horror at the very

thought of paying divine honors to a man. How explain it, if not through a revelation of the Spirit?

Fourthly, the apostles were transformed into new men by the tidings they bore. In becoming Christians they received power to set the world on fire with the contagion of their vision, their hope, their inextinguishable love. The word lodged in their minds became a dynamic force driving them to go forth and preach to all mankind. Nothing in the formation of most of them — whether fishermen, tax-collectors, tentmakers — would have made them likely candidates for such a mission. They had received Power from on high — the Spirit!

Lastly, one must consider the intrinsic quality of the Christian message. It is not the kind of message easily dreamed up even by the wise, let alone by disturbed minds.

If men of the first century, whether Jews or Gentiles, were asked to guess in what form God might appear on earth, non would have imagined Him coming as humble, gentle, utterly human. Who would have dreamed of the divine Good Shepherd? He constantly does the unexpected — praises pagans and prostitutes, draws near to Samaritans and lepers. He labors hard but finds time for little children. He rebukes the winds yet falls silent before His accusers. Men never would have fabricated, nor could have, such a figure as their religious leader. Precisely for this reason the Gospels have undying power to convert human hearts. After reading them we can only exclaim: this rings true. For behind them, inspiring them, has been the Spirit of Truth — the Holy Spirit!

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