

Three Approaches Sixth Week of Easter Wednesday, May 28, 2014 8:15 AM
Acts 17:15-22—18:1; Jn 16:12-15 (What does it mean to believe that our bodies, although they are obviously mortal now, are made to be immortal?)

As we read through the liturgical lessons for the Easter Season, in a way we are like playing Ping-Pong, but it's a three-way Ping-Pong, because **there are three different approaches to the message of Christ found within the New Testament.**

The first is the **view of Matthew, Mark, Jude, Peter, James.** It's basically the idea of a **renewed Judaism**, a Judaism that is messianic, that is salvific, and that is fulfilled in the person of Christ. So those who follow him now live a fulfilled life, a living out of the Torah in love of God and neighbor, as Jesus himself exemplified. The key text is the general judgment, the **Last Judgment**, where the Son of Man separates the sheep from the goats. The key is always, well, "whatever you did to the least, you did to me," in other words, **Christ incognito and, therefore, an ethical life flowing from that insight.**

But then we have the readings of John, and **John's theology** is very different. Most of the gospels during Easter have been from John. John has a very different viewpoint. John is a mystic. His whole approach is to show that **following Jesus is a life of communion with the divine Trinity through friendship with Jesus.** And this new life takes you, as it were, out of the world. **It makes the world's issues irrelevant.** It makes time irrelevant. Some people find it hard to transport themselves between these two viewpoints.

Well, it's worse, because now we have a third one, and that of course is **St. Paul and Luke**, the author of the Acts of the Apostles. That is **the whole gentile mission**, the opening up of the good news of God's mercy to the nations, perfectly expressed in today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

Paul is where? In Athens at the **Areopagus**, which is really an open air market but also a public shrine to the many various gods believed in at that time. Now Paul is really interested in trying to make some kind of headway, finding a common ground, with the people he is speaking to. He is bending over backwards to honor their way of life. So he says, "Well, I found a shrine to an **unknown God**, and I'm going to tell you about that unknown God

because I happen to know all about him.” And then he uses that, which actually had nothing to do with Christianity originally, as **an entrée to talk about the gospel**, the message of the living God, who made heaven and earth, who sent his Son to reconcile human life to himself and to create a new kind of world.

Now this third approach is, of course, essentially very ecumenical, very open-minded, very evangelical; but it does require a very profound response. It’s not merely a matter of responding to Christ incognito, simply being just and charitable. Nor is it really a life of personal mysticism, a life of interior piety, interior prayer and mystical union, as tends to be the Johannine approach. This is different. **This is a message that requires breaking with the past and believing in the One who is raised from the dead.** That’s the cornerstone. But that becomes the stumbling block, as St. Paul himself mentions. It’s a **stumbling block** because it believes in a God who has dominion over death—not only life, but over death—who can bring up from the dead new life.

Now in one way **this became the primary form of Christianity**, except that in many ways **what it means has not really been explored.** What does it mean to believe that we are going to be raised from the dead? **What does it mean to believe that our bodies, although they are obviously mortal now, are made to be immortal?** What sort of consequences does that hold for the way we live in this world, for the care we give to ourselves and to the world that we belong to? This has not really been explored.

There is a way in which, unfortunately, many people have accepted the gospel in words, but not in meaning and not in consequences of the gospel. So this is the work, now, of the **Church. It is not only to evangelize the world, but it is to bring all the consequence of this gospel message into itself**—and to think, not just to go and look up what the book says, but to think about: So now what? **What are we supposed to be and what are we supposed to do?**