

Statement for Website  
From Fr. Michael Basque

30 May 2020

Some time ago, a parishioner asked me why there are four different Gospels in the New Testament. The person also wondered why details about certain events recorded in them are not identical. For example, according to Matthew the last words said by Jesus were “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me” while in Luke they were “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit”. If the Gospels were written to convince people about the truth of the life and message of Jesus, surely they would want to present a consistent story. I responded by asking if four people witnessed the same event (a car accident) what are the chances they would tell identical stories? Each Gospel was written by a different person, to a certain audience to communicate a specific message. When properly understood, these differences in the New Testament enabled the Church to present a more complete picture of Jesus to the world.

In today’s First Reading and Gospel, we read two different accounts of a central event in the history of the Church: the Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In the Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke, the Holy Spirit comes upon the Apostles fifty days after Easter and particular signs are associated with the event (wind, tongues of fire, the ability to speak many languages). According to John’s Gospel, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles on Easter evening and gives them the authority to forgive and retain sins but without any particular signs. So, why the difference? Perhaps each author was attempting to communicate something important about the relationship between Easter and Pentecost. By separating the two events by fifty days Luke stresses the importance of each event. Easter was when Jesus rose from the dead and vindicated his teachings (especially those about eternal life). Pentecost was when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples so they could continue the Church’s mission after Jesus ascended into heaven. Each event marked a significant development in the unfolding of God’s plan on earth. By having the two events occur on the same day, John stresses how they are connected. Christ’s resurrection raised the question of what would happen to his mission. The coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles that evening insured the continuity between Christ’s and the Church’s mission would be maintained from the start. Each evangelist revealed distinct but complementary components of the Christian message.

Catholics and other people of faith understand the importance of stories. Most religious traditions have some form of sacred texts. These stories do more than just transmit information about God and how believers should live. They record and then explain the importance of events which define the relationship between God and humans. Since the core of this bond is a divine mystery, it is impossible for any single account to relay the entirety of what God wants to reveal. Different versions and multiple interpretations of the same story may be necessary to do so. For this reason, it takes careful reflection over many generations to grasp the meaning of an event.

During this Covid-19 pandemic, there are multiple stories being told about it. There are the experiences of those who have had the disease and recovered or have lost someone they love to it. Medical and government leaders recount the conditions under which certain decisions were made and the consequences of them. Individuals tell how they are coping with the uncertainties

around their health and economic future. Since they are used to dealing the sacred texts which do not always present a simple message, Catholics and other people of faith should be prepared for the variety of stories they will encounter and try to understand them. One important service they can provide at this time is to just listen to others. All people need to know they are worth being heard. From multiple stories come different insights which with time and reflection may combine into a better picture of what is happening to us, With this clearer view, we are likely to be better able to help others.

As today's readings indicate, the true meaning of important events may best be found not from one person but many.