

BELIEVE!

June 8, 2014

Acts 2: 1-21

John 20: 19-23

The Stone: Is Belief A Jewish Notion? by Gary Gutting, March 30, 2014

This is Pentecost, fifty days after Easter, more or less, when God sent the Holy Spirit to flow upon his followers and his disciples. Pentecost is the Greek word originally describing the Hebrew Festival of the Weeks or Shavuot, celebrating fifty days after Passover, and when Moses gave the tablets of the law. It's just one more evidence of how closely allied are the traditions of the Hebrew and Christian bibles.

We see that bestowal of the Holy Spirit in our readings this morning. It's in Acts with the experience of seeing and speaking in tongues and it is in reading from John, where Jesus comes back to the disciples, fifty days after having gone missing from the tomb, to bring them the Holy Spirit of belief. Our gospel reading for today is all about belief, and belief in its most literal form. Surely nothing could be more literal than what is laid out for us here in the gospel of John, the opportunity that is given to Thomas to poke about in the ghostly corpus of the divinity. Many of us are familiar with the term "Doubting Thomas" and of characters with this name. "Oh, he is such a Doubting Thomas," we say, meaning someone who is cautious of commitment to the point of vacillation. He won't make a decision because he cannot be certain of the facts. But here, in John's gospel, Jesus passes through closed doors to let Thomas have all the possible opportunity to know that it is in fact the crucified Jesus that has returned. And really, Thomas may touch his hand, and he may actually put his finger in Jesus' side. It does make you consider all the various aspects of corporeality... for example, if Jesus could walk through a door, and yet still have the substance such that a wound could be felt - well, it's a puzzlement. In any case, Thomas was not puzzled, but rather said, "My Lord and My God!" for he now believed. And John has Jesus say to

him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

And we are left with the sense that the greater blessing is reserved for those who believe even though they have not seen, or perhaps believe because they have not seen. But we'll get to that.

Certainly there will probably not be many of us who have seen... I know that there are some who are given visions and, indeed, I have had conversions with people who have had visions and it has changed their lives. I don't know if this is exactly the same thing as what happened in that room with the disciples that night or not. Again, the issue of the corporeality. But I do know that the connection of not seeing and belief can be powerful. And it is that that I want to talk about today.

Some of us had a conversation after the Beaverkill Church ended last September concerning the nature of belief, what it was that we believed in actually, how we had found our way to that belief, and so forth. And we talked about some books, and, in the nature of those things, the conversation got a little round about, but it did start out to be about belief.

In the Gospel of John and in Acts, the Holy Spirit is dumped all over the room, or maybe dumps itself all over the room would be the more exact expression. The recipients, the relatives, friends and followers, the disciples, don't have a lot to do with summoning the spirit, but once it is there, especially in the story of the tongues, they interact with it. They have not been philosophizing about their belief, but rather they are together because it is Pentecost and it is traditional for them to gather and it would not be unexpected for something from the Holy Spirit to appear - that is what they are commemorating. In a sense, they are gathered to pray.

Now this brings me to a conversation about which I read in a New York Times on line site called "The Stone", which is described as a forum for contemporary philosophers.

It's an interview with Howard Wettstein, a professor of philosophy at the University of California, and the author of a book called "*The Significance of Religious Experience.*" At issue in this conversation is the distinction between the "participation in a practice and the activity of theorizing about the practice." Thus Wettstein says that he has a powerful experience when he prays, that his relationship to God has come to be a "pillar to his life" in his understanding of the wonders and awfulness of the world. Yet, he says, he has no ability and no desire to speak of God as if he, God, had a natural or spiritual substance. He does not get such talk... it is unintelligible. So here is the conundrum, if, indeed, it is a conundrum. A fervent religious life need not involve a defined concept of God. One may have an ongoing and intimate relationship with an awe-inspiring conversational partner and never broach the matter of the definition of that partner. Here is what Wettstein says: "Religious life, at least as it is for me, does not involve anything like a well-defined, or even something on the way to becoming a well-defined, concept of God, a concept of the kind that a philosopher could live with. What is fundamental is no such thing, but rather the experience of God, for example in prayer or in life's stunning moments. Prayer, when it works, yields an awe-infused sense of having made contact, or almost having done so. Having made contact, that is, concerning the things that matter most, whether the health and well-being of others, or of the community, or even my own; concerning justice and its frequent absence in our world; concerning my gratefulness to, or praise of, God. The experience of sharing commitments with a cosmic senior partner, sharing in the sense both of communicating and literally sharing, 'dreaming in league with God,' as A.J Heschel puts it, is both heady and heartening. Even when that partner remains undefined and untheorized." When I read this passage, I found it enormously liberating for it is something that I had thought myself for a long time, though in a relatively inchoate sort of a way. All I knew was that if I or anyone was called upon to define God, that it was wrong, not morally wrong, perhaps, but that it just did not make sense to attempt to do so, for God, if there was God, was ultimately not to be articulated by us. Experienced, perhaps, and that

experience described, but not the being put into words and concepts. That idea is something even that passages in the Bible allude to - the elusive, "I am what I am," for example. The notion is that if we do, in fact, experience God, we will be so out of our element, so over our head, that we will not be seeing large men with white beards, or anything of the sort. Indeed, certainly the Burning Bush must be the symbol of the unknowable and all powerful nature of this experience. One is not allowed to see God because the sight is too overpowering for our poor eyes to encompass, for our poor brains to absorb.

Our individual or even group experience is more like poetry than it is like something that can be defined precisely and signed up for like legislation. They are moments of insight, edification and illumination that do not necessarily line up behind one another in a regimented file, one thought supporting another.

And that sense of awe in these prayerful conversations may in fact be what is most useful to us now in these times when we think of ourselves as all powerful, perhaps as too powerful. When everything is anthropomorphic, it is helpful, perhaps, for us to be able to get as far away as possible from all that we know and are able to do. To be humble enough to say that we don't know who this God is, we cannot see him, we cannot state his nature. God is unknowable and therefore the real question about God cannot be one of whether or not he exists, but rather of one's relationship to him and the character of one's spiritual life. In that way, one can say "I believe," and even say, "I believe in God," but without defining in any way specifically the characteristics of that god. Rather, all one can do is talk about what has happened in one's life, in one's experience to make one say this.

In conclusion, there are many things that can be said about the passage from Acts and I think that we have spoken of some of them in the past. This illustration of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit is an evidence of something that is awesomely different so that you might know that it is not something that you constructed out of your own intellect. You may not see tongues like fire, or be able to speak in previously unknown

languages when you pray, but the sense of being in the presence of God, or the Holy Spirit should be utterly different. And we cannot explain that, or diagram that, or label that. And if we could explain God, then probably it would not be God... or at least only a god that one could put away in a drawer and bring out when convenient.

Now, we have a different situation when we come to the disciples in the room when Jesus comes to them as described by John. This is a scene where there is physical definition that is offered to humanity. Jesus is really not trying to take Mary Magdalene and the disciples to someplace out of their ordinary experience - he offers them his hands and his side so that they can see, and, in the case of Thomas, even feel, his wounds, so that they will know in their brains, not just in their spirits or some others parts of their knowingness, that he has returned. He wants, it seems from the way that it is written, to assure them in a very specific, non-ecstatic way that he was there for them.

But at the same time, he ends by saying, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." And that to me, is what the core of the message is, is what belief is all about. If you can see with your eyes and understand with your brain, well really, there is no need to believe. It's only otherwise that one needs to believe. And that is why we are all here.

Compare Tongues and John with thoughts in The Stone