

Mobile Jews hear Christian explain resurrection belief

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The belief in the resurrection of Jesus is "the heart of Christian faith," said a Mobile priest to an audience including Jews and Christians.

The Rev. Russell Biven of St. Joan of Arc Catholic Parish spoke to the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue Group in a session in the Human Relations Center of Spring Hill College.

FATHER BIVEN said a person who turns to the Christian New Testament to focus on the resurrection finds that "in the most primitive New Testament text the resurrection of Jesus was the object not of elaborate explanation or defense but of simple proclamation. The fundamental resurrection statement of the Christian community and its missionaries was that Jesus was raised."

The priest said, "The basic affirmation of the Easter proclamation is that Jesus in his resurrection was the recipient of divine action.

"This understanding leads to another. The resurrection was the experience of Jesus the man. It was as human

that Jesus died and as human that he was raised by God.

"**THE RESURRECTION**, therefore, was seen by the earliest believers as an act of God toward the man Jesus. God raised up this man to vindicate his human mission, to affirm his human righteousness, to exercise the divine fidelity toward one who trusted God would not abandon either his person or his cause."

Jesus was not merely resuscitated, said Father Biven, but he was brought into a "completely new state. The man Jesus was exalted by God. Jesus entered into the very kingdom of God.... He is seen as going ahead of us, and it is from there that he will come as Christ and Lord to announce the final judgment of God on all humanity and all creation."

ACCORDING TO Father Biven, later New Testament texts, particularly the Gospel of John, speak "of Jesus' raising himself from the dead by his own power. This language, according to the common view of contemporary New Testament scholars, represents the subsequent insight of faith into the implication of God's act of raising Jesus from the dead."

The speaker said the "later New Testament understanding of the meaning of the resurrection, as well as other important insights into the implication of Jesus' resurrection for the salvation of humankind, should not distract us from appreciating what is basic and universal in the Christian proclamation concerning the resurrection: The man Jesus died and was raised by God."

In identifying "more clearly the historical origins of the Easter faith," Father Biven said a person should turn to the letters of the Apostle Paul.

AMONG PASSAGES from Paul's letters which Father Biven discussed was one from Paul's first letter to the Christian Church in Corinth about 27 years after the death of Jesus.

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth about the Christian proclamation of Jesus' resurrection, which was "a message he himself (Paul) had received," said Father Biven.

The message was not Paul's creation. Paul may have received the message himself in the primitive Christian community in Damascus "at the time of Paul's experience of the risen Christ, his so-called conversion." He may have received the message "from the Christian leadership in Jerusalem when Paul visited some two years or so after he began his Christian mission."

SAID THE SPEAKER, "We have then in this passage from the letter of Paul an expression of the Easter proclamation that goes back ... some five years after the death of Jesus."

Paul gives a fuller statement of the Easter proclamation than does the most primitive account, according to Father Biven.

"In this passage Paul states that Jesus was buried and that he appeared to chosen followers, to Peter and the 12, to more than 500 one time, to James, the apostles and finally to Paul himself."

THE POINT IS, said the priest, that "this proclamation of Jesus' resurrection, which in substance at least comes from the very earliest years of the Christian experience, contains an outline of a narrative, a story of the resurrection of Jesus. It speaks of his death, his burial, his being raised and his appearing to certain people."

The four Gospels of Christian Scripture, written one or two generations after the mission of Paul, develop the resurrection proclamation into a story, also, according to Father Biven.

THE GOSPELS, however, "are not in accord with each other or with Paul in listing those who received appearances from the living Jesus, nor are they in agreement with each other as to where the appearances took place."

Calling any effort to harmonize the Gospel accounts

"unnecessary and futile," Father Biven concentrated instead on "two important considerations of the resurrection which are common to these Gospel accounts."

FIRST, THE WAY Jesus was experienced by those who encountered him after he had risen from the dead was as one who was "both the same and yet different from his human condition previous to his resurrection."

Jesus was "not immediately recognized by those who had known him well during his ministry. He is somehow different and is only recognized to be Jesus after he breaks bread with them or speaks to them."

Father Biven said the description given by Paul is that "Jesus' ascension, his exaltation, took place into glory at the moment of his resurrection. The appearances of Jesus are thus encountered with the risen and exalted Lord. He appears from glory to chosen witnesses. He is seen and heard as human and body and yet transformed."

THE SECOND consideration which Father Biven focused on was that "Jesus appears to his disciples to send them on mission. They are to teach, according to Matthew's account. They are to be witnesses, according to Luke. They are to loose from sin, according to John's account. They are to be apostles to the nations in Paul's account."

Thus the Easter experience of the disciples "is to be the basis for the faith of future believers, who through their testimony come to accept the risen Jesus even though they've never seen him."

DISCUSSING ANOTHER aspect of the resurrection, Father Biven said the four Gospels narrate the story of the empty tomb. "All four Gospels agree that some time on the third day after Jesus' death, certain followers of Jesus went to the tomb and found it empty and received an angelic message. It was the proclamation Jesus was raised."

Details of the empty tomb are not in agreement in the Gospels, and Father Biven did not attempt to harmonize them.

Instead he again turned to "important similarities."

FIRST, ALL THE Gospels describe the persons discovering the empty tomb as being surprised. "The Gospels all agree that the disciples, far from anticipating Jesus' being raised from the dead, were slow to come to this belief. Nor did the empty tomb kindle such an understanding."

SECOND, "ALL the Gospels agree that it was not the empty tomb that engendered faith in Jesus raised from the dead. It was rather the proclamation of the resurrection that was associated with this discovery."

Concluding, the speaker said, "Easter faith does not rest on the empty tomb but on the witness of those to whom Jesus is believed to have appeared."