

MARCH 25, 2012: FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT
Jeremiah 31:31-34 Hebrews 5:7-9 John 12:20-33

It's important to note that John has arranged his gospel in such a way that today's pericope comes immediately before Jesus' last supper. These are his final words before his passion/resurrection. This seems to be why the evangelist puts this well-known statement on his lips: "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." John's original readers understood that Jesus wasn't teaching agriculture 101; he was teaching Christianity 101.

As a child I'm afraid I wasn't very focused on dying and rising. Though Lent was a time of "giving stuff up," somehow I never looked at that practice as a dying/rising experience. By sacrificing things I liked for 40 days, I simply was preparing a higher place in heaven for myself. Jesus simply wanted us to carry out lots of penances so that we would be happy with him forever. Though I heard today's dying seed saying, I only applied it to Jesus. I never understood how it mirrored my own life of faith. The stuff I gave up during Lent had little to do with this life; it only helped me zero in on the next life. Probably John's Jesus would never have categorized my Lenten penances as the dying and rising about which he spoke.

It's important we hear Jesus' dead seed comment against the background of the "Greeks" who came to see him. John's original readers would have been very conscious of the death the Christian community had recently experienced by accepting non-Jews (Greeks) into their faith without first demanding they convert to Judaism. We know from Paul's letters that this decision had not only split the church's members, it also brought them a life they'd never anticipated. A movement which started as a Jewish reform sect in the early 30s was now in the mid-90s a world-wide faith. But to achieve that stature, followers of Jesus had to die to their old frame of mind.

It's no accident that the author of the Letter to the Hebrews brings up Jesus' obedience. As a good Jew, we presume Jesus had a preconceived notion of what Yahweh expected of him. Like his fellow Pharisees, he kept the 613 laws of Moses and fulfilled his liturgical obligations. Yet, as we hear in the gospels, he eventually began to understand that God was calling him to go further: to put people before laws and his relationship with God before institutions. I take for granted that lots of "prayers, supplications, loud cries and tears" accompanied that insight. It was a real death for Jesus to accept Yahweh's plan, and discard his own.

Six hundred years before Jesus' birth, Jeremiah courageously talks about a similar process. At this point in his prophetic ministry he's basically given up on reforming the Judaism of his day and age. He's willing to let the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem and its temple in the hope that a faith born in exile will actually be the faith Yahweh demands.

One dimension of this new faith revolves around recognizing that God is present, working in each person who professes this faith. "I will place my law within them," Yahweh promises, "and write it upon their hearts . . . No longer will they have need to teach their friends and relatives how to know Yahweh." The prophet presumes everyone has God's plan written deep within themselves.

Jesus agrees. Had he just followed the laws and did what the institution demanded, he would never have talked about dying. Perhaps that's also where he wants us to be on the second last Sunday of Lent. He expects us to give up what he gave up. There's no other way to experience the life he wants to share with us.

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APRIL 1, 2012: PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION
 Isaiah 50:4-7 Philippians 2:5-11 Mark 14:1-15:47

During my final Licentiate exam 47 years ago, I started sweating when my Gregorian University professor (and world's expert on Jesus' divinity) Bernard Lonergan pushed a copy of the Christian Scriptures across the table and asked me to prove Jesus is God from one of the three Agony in the Garden passages.

I couldn't.

After I finally confessed, "I can't prove he's God from this passage," Lonergan smiled and said, "Correct! No one can. In Gethsemane Jesus is a human being."

After Lonergan's segment of the exam ended, he shook my hand, asked where I lived in the States, then gave me an unexpected piece of advice. "When you get home, forget a lot of the stuff I taught you about the Trinity and Jesus' divinity. Preach Jesus' humanity, it's the only part of Jesus with whom your people can identify."

We who preach during this holiest of weeks should keep Lonergan's words in the back of our minds. Most of the authors of the Christian Scriptures we'll hear during the next few days agree with him. We especially see Jesus' humanity breaking through in today's second and third readings.

Notice first how, once our four gospel Passion Narratives begin, Jesus' miraculous powers cease. Except for restoring a servant's lopped-off ear in Luke's Gethsemane account, Jesus works no miracles during a time we'd expect him to work lots of miracles. He faces suffering and death as any of us would face them - with only his humanity to fall back on.

Second, though we still have Deutero-Isaiah's reflection on his physical torture ringing in our ears, we're given a different picture of Jesus. No one doubts he endured great physical pain during his passion, but our evangelists rarely zero in on that aspect of his suffering. In today's Marcan account, for instance, the first mention of any physical pain comes only half-way through the narrative when his Jewish guards strike him and say, "Prophesy!" His actual crucifixion is described in just four words, "Then they crucified him. . . ."

On the other hand, Jesus' psychological suffering is constantly front and center. He's betrayed by one of his Twelve, all his disciples desert him in the garden, his own people reject him, and the leader of his small band of followers caves into pressure and swears, "I do not know the man." When push comes to shove, the Jerusalem Passover crowd even chooses a murderer over him.

There can be only one reason for this consistent emphasis on Jesus' psychological suffering: that's the kind of pain most of his followers endure every day in their imitation of him. Rarely does being another Christ demand physical suffering. But we can never avoid the mental pain and stress which accompanies our giving of ourselves to others. And, like the gospel Jesus, we can't expect God to miraculously take it away. Only by going through it do we eventually reach the life Jesus attained. Instead of thanking Jesus for dying for us, we should be thanking him for showing us how to die for others.

We should listen to our well-known Philippians against this same background. Instead of hearing this early Christian hymn in the context of John 1, which speaks of Jesus' pre-existence as God, we should be hearing it in the context of Genesis 1, which speaks of all humans being created in the image and likeness of God. Jesus never falls back on a prerogative all of us share: our likeness to God. On the contrary, only by taking the "form of a slave" - by identifying with the most powerless - does Jesus eventually receive the "name above every name:" Yahweh.

Unless we humans mentally become one with Jesus this week, his being one with us won't make any sense.

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