

JANUARY 19, 2014: SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 49:3, 5-6 I Corinthians 1:1-3 John 1:29-44

It's impossible to understand today's first reading without restoring verse 4 to the passage. Though convinced he's Yahweh's prophet, Deutero-Isaiah is just as convinced he's failed in the mission Yahweh's given him to accomplish. "I thought," the prophet reflects, "I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength." In other words, "I never did what you expected me to do."

Yet, for some divine reason, Yahweh's not worried about the prophet's failure. In spite of his people not listening to his oracles, Deutero-Isaiah is certain, ". . . my reward is with Yahweh, my recompense is with my God." In an environment of striving for success, God's reaction to our failures is unique. Disciples of God simply have to get used to employing a different value system when it comes to their discipleship.

In some sense, this unnamed prophet can't figure out why, after he failed at bringing Jacob back to Yahweh or gathering Israel to God, he still realizes "I am made glorious in the sight of Yahweh and my God is now my strength." Yahweh's glory has been shown by Deutero-Isaiah's failures, not by his successes. Not only that, but the prophet receives an even broader mission: "It is too little, Yahweh says, "for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel, I will make you a light to the nations (Gentiles), that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." The prophet's lack of success opens new horizons for him.

Between now and the first week of March - except for the feast of the Presentation - our second readings will be from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, a letter he probably composed after he'd come to the conclusion he'd lost control over that particular community. Though today's short passage contains one of his "normal" greetings to a church he had founded, over the next month and a half we're going to see just how "unholy" many in that community had become. No doubt Paul was tempted to conclude he'd wasted his time in evangelizing them. Yet, this unique letter, written from the viewpoint of failure, has become a classic guide for understanding Christian communities and the Spirit working in them.

Scripture scholars constantly warn us to distinguish the historical John the Baptizer from the gospel John the Baptist. We Christians automatically look at this wilderness prophet as Jesus' precursor: the person who plows the field ahead of Jesus' planting. That's the image our four evangelists have created in order to somehow relate John's ministry to Jesus' ministry. He proclaims the "Lamb of God" in our midst, and testifies, "A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me." John dies a happy man because he's made Jesus known.

But that's not how the historical John would have judged his God-given mission. As an Essene - a member of the Dead Sea scrolls community - John, like Jesus, insisted on repentance. But the reason the Baptizer was so anxious to have people change their value systems was to prepare the way for Yahweh's appearance on earth, an appearance which he hoped would right the wrongs his community had suffered a century before at the hands of the Jerusalem authority structure.

Obviously things didn't turn out the way John anticipated. His preaching didn't usher in Yahweh's arrival; it simply hastened his own death. He probably looked at his martyrdom as a sign he'd failed in the task Yahweh gave him.

When we fail in carrying out what we conceive to be God's plans for us, it's important to remember the failures of Deutero-Isaiah, Paul, and John the Baptist. They couldn't have been more successful.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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JANUARY 26, 2014: THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Isaiah 8:23-9:3 I Corinthians 1:10,13,17 Matthew 4:12-23

I can't imagine the nightmare it would be for Paul of Tarsus to walk down any of our large American cities and calculate the number of diverse Christian churches per square mile. Just as Back to the Future's Marty McFly loses it when anyone calls him "Chicken!", so the Apostle becomes greatly disturbed when anyone causes divisions in the communities he evangelized. This is certainly the case in his Corinthian church.

At the very beginning of the first letter he wrote to that particular community Paul deals with the one issue which is really bugging him: "I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose."

"Chloe's people" have informed him that some Corinthian Christians are actually creating factions based on the persons who baptized or evangelized them: Paul, Apollos, or Cephas (Peter). In frustration Paul demands to know, "Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

The Apostle reminds his readers that his ministry to them revolved around preaching the gospel, not baptizing, and that the message he preached was always "the cross of Christ," a cross they were obviously trying to avoid or ignore. Over and over again, Paul had taught them that in order to live with the risen Jesus, they first had to die with the risen Jesus.

Just what does it mean to die with Jesus?

All of us know about the old "penitential orders" whose members, especially during Holy Week, would scourge themselves until their back became bloody. And every Good Friday we're made aware of some young men in a village in the Philippines who actually let themselves be nailed to a cross. Is this what Paul means by "dying" with Jesus? We never hear anything like this in any of his letters.

Paul's idea of dying with Jesus springs from his conviction that, before anything else, those who imitate Jesus are expected to die by becoming one with one another.

A fulfilled Christian life is more than just no longer having enemies breathe down our throats, as we hear in today's Isaiah passage. The "great light" we've experienced - the light which brings true rejoicing - permeates all our existence, not just those surface areas.

That light is rooted in the message the historical Jesus constantly proclaims: God's kingdom is all around us. The gospel kingdom of God (or heaven) has nothing to do with the after-life. It always refers to God working effectively in our daily lives right here and now. But in order to surface that kingdom, we must "repent:" completely change our value systems. We, like Jesus' first four disciples, are called to make people, not things, the focus of our lives. Nothing can ever become more important than our relations with one another.

Those familiar with I Corinthians know the importance of the second half of chapter 11. It's there that Paul pinpoints the place and time in which we're most expected to be one: the Eucharist. It's during that celebration that we best "proclaim the death of Jesus" by dying ourselves.

In this day and age it's hard enough for Democrats and Republicans to die to themselves enough to actually become one. But it's even harder for Methodists and Catholics to pull it off. After all, we don't even permit non-Catholics to receive the Eucharist. I would hate to think of what Paul will have to say about that when we one day meet him at the pearly gates.

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