

NOVEMBER 15TH, 2015: THIRTY THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Daniel 12:1-3 Hebrews 10:11-14, 18 Mark 13:24-32

For almost a century and a half, scholars have debated whether the historical Jesus actually preached God's kingdom among us right here and now, or whether he preached about its future arrival. Both opinions can be defended from Scripture.

But from those same Scriptures, we can be fairly certain what some of Jesus' first century disciples believed on the topic.

All experts agree that one of the most difficult (and unexpected) things with which Jesus' earliest followers had to deal was his "delayed Parousia." We know from the earliest Christian writing we possess – I Thessalonians – that Paul was convinced Jesus' Second Coming was just around the corner. He still was hoping for his imminent arrival when, ten years later in the late 50s, he wrote his first letter to the Christian community in Corinth. In it, he advised its unmarried members not to get married because the time between then and Jesus' arrival was very "short." They certainly wouldn't get their hall deposit back if he appeared before the day of their actual ceremony.

Today's gospel pericope from Mark most probably came from the last years of this "It's just around the corner" belief. Though Jesus was still delaying, the "fig tree was about ready to bloom." Mark might not be around to experience it, but he was convinced some of his readers would still be alive when it happened. His goal was to instill the faith of Daniel in them, a faith which constantly looked forward to God breaking into the lives of the faithful and delivering them from all their problems.

This hope for an imminent Parousia began to fade by the mid-eighties when Luke composed his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. The third evangelist seems to be the first Christian author to presume that he and the community for which he wrote would all live their natural lives and die before Jesus' return. That major change in faith automatically forced many Christians to switch their focus from the future to the here and now. More and more they began to zero in on the risen Jesus' presence in everyone they met and every situation they encountered.

Within ten years, John's gospel eventually appeared, featuring the novel theology of "realized eschatology." Events which followers of Jesus had once presumed would happen at the end of their salvation history were already taking place as that history was still unfolding. (One need only listen to the chapter 11 exchange between Martha and Jesus on the occasion of her brother Lazarus' death to surface an example of this new way of thinking. Note how John's Jesus assures her that what she thought was going to happen in the future is already taking place as they speak.)

The author of Hebrews might not have totally bought into John's realized eschatology, but he's obviously concerned with making certain his community reflects on how Jesus' death and resurrection has changed how we live our lives right here and now. No matter whether Jesus returns or not, we – unlike our Jewish ancestors - no longer have to worry about "sin offerings." Our sins have already been forgiven.

But, getting back to the historical Jesus, can we know with complete certitude what he actually believed and preached? Probably not.

In spite of that, experts agree he certainly mixed both the future and the present in his preaching. Though he might have thought a special future event would drastically change the universe, he also was convinced that such a change would begin in the way we lived our daily lives right now.

Perhaps some of us have yet to acquire that kind of faith.

NOVEMBER 22ND, 2015: CHRIST THE KING

Daniel 7:13-14 Revelation 1:5-8 John 18:33b-37

Did the historical Jesus actually conceive of himself as a king? Though the Roman authorities nailed that insurrectionist title on his cross, there's no reason to believe he ever accepted it.

Each of us has an image of who we are: a way of seeing ourselves in the world in which we live. Yet at the same time, every person who encounters us during our lifetime also has an image of us – an image often at right angles to our own. I presume the itinerant preacher from Capernaum was no different.

Like last week's quest about the historical Jesus' concept of God's kingdom, so today, though we know little about the image he had of himself during his earthly ministry, we can be fairly certain of the various images his first century followers had of him. They're well portrayed in our Christian Scriptures.

The author of Revelation, for instance, provides us with a bunch of them in our second reading. For him, the risen Jesus is "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth." He's also "the Alpha and the Omega . . . the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty." In other words, he/she is everything for everybody: the very beginning and end of the whole universe.

The early church would frequently go through the Hebrew Scriptures, searching for images they could attach to the risen Jesus. Today's Daniel pericope provides the classic "Son of man" depiction. Though the gospel Jesus often uses the title about himself, no one can be certain how he means it. Is he implying that he's the mysterious, semi-divine person whom Daniel saw "coming on the clouds of heaven;" a person who would receive "dominion, glory, and kingship?" Or could he be referring to Yahweh's use of the term in addressing the prophet Ezekiel; a title which implied "I'm God, and you're not?" In other words, "I, Jesus, am just a human being like you are." The same term can conjure up two opposite images.

Yet, today's image of Jesus as king would certainly have created problems for both the historical Jesus and his first followers. Living in the Roman Empire, they were expected, under threats of "treason," to have just one king: Caesar. That seems to be why whenever the "king thing" comes up in the gospels, Jesus either rejects the title, or, as in today's Johannine passage, stresses that he's not a king in the way the word is normally defined: "My kingdom does not belong to this world." No matter what, Jesus never seems to have imagined himself as belonging to royalty.

On the contrary, our evangelists, especially Mark, seem to have given titles to Jesus which their readers could make their own, not just ooh and aah about. We need only go back several weekends to the Mark 10 narrative in which the gospel Jesus refers to himself as the "servant" and "slave" of all; a person who "did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." He certainly never had an image of himself as someone who would ever "lord it over" anyone.

Though, through the centuries, many Christian leaders thought of themselves as representatives of royalty, the majority of the faithful thankfully regarded themselves as mirroring the servant image which the historical and gospel Jesus had of himself. If they hadn't, the faith which this Galilean carpenter professed and shared, would never have had any effect in changing the world.

The best image we can form of ourselves always revolves around how we want to carry on Jesus' ministry.