FEBRUARY 26, 2012: FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 9:8-15 I Peter 3:18-22 Mark 1:12-15

I can't emphasize enough the importance of today's gospel pericope. It not only sets the theme for Mark's entire gospel, it also gives us an insight into the historical Jesus' ministry.

Though I, like most of you, was taught the reason Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, came to earth was to show us the way to heaven, this passage points us in a somewhat different direction.

There's some "unease" with this "get-us-into-heaven" theology among those who read Mark's gospel carefully, especially because of chapter 10's rich young man narrative. Notice what he asks Jesus: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" In other words, "What will get me into heaven?" Jesus responses, "Keep the commandments." When he assures the teacher that he's kept them from his youth, we presume he's eventually going to get into heaven. So when Jesus tells him there's something he's still lacking, the missing element has nothing to do with the man's eternal happiness. This is verified when Jesus later observes, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." For Jesus, entering heaven and entering the kingdom of God are obviously two different states of life.

That's why our gospel pericope is so important. It not only contains the first words of Jesus' public ministry, we presume he includes these words in every sermon, instruction, and homily he delivers during that ministry. They're an essential part of his "stump speech." "This is the time of fulfillment," he announces. "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the good news!"

Scholars tell us the phrase "kingdom of God" (or "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew) doesn't refer to the place we plan to inhabit after our physical death. It refers to God working effectively in our lives right here and now. That's the "good news" Jesus spends his ministry proclaiming, and for which he'll eventually be crucified. In the rich young man narrative, he seems to presume people can "get into heaven" without entering the kingdom of God. He shutters his Capernaum carpenter shop and goes village to village, synagogue to synagogue encouraging people to experience God in their lives long before they leave this life.

There's just one kicker: Jesus is convinced that in order to experience God they must "repent." The Greek word employed here - "metanoia" - implies more than just "I'm sorry I did it; and I won't do it anymore." In this context, repent refers to a total change in one's value system: a one hundred and eighty degree shift in what one holds to be important in his or her life. Mark will spend the rest of his gospel informing us of the characteristics of that shift.

It now makes sense why the rich young man walked away from Jesus' invitation. Repentance for him entailed concentrating on people instead of making money; a step lots of rich individuals find impossible to take. They'd be forced to develop a completely different lifestyle.

That's why baptism by immersion was such a meaningful sign for Jesus' first followers. As the author of I Peter puts it, it's more than just "a removal of dirt from the body." It's a dying and rising entrance into a whole new life.

Early Christian authors often used the flood as a symbol of the life they were now living. Just as the original Genesis flood survivors entered a new relationship with Yahweh, so we who have "survived" the waters of baptism enter a new relationship with God.

If we spent less time worrying about getting into heaven, and more time concentrating on what's necessary to surface God here and now, perhaps we'd eventually become the other Christs Jesus intends us to become.

Roger Vermalen Karban

This commentary is provided by the FAITHFUL OF SOUTHERN ILLINOIS. Please share it with a friend.
We appreciate your comments and donations.

F.O.S.I.L., BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

MARCH 4, 2012: SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13,15-18 Romans 8:31b-34 Mark 9:2-10

I had a lousy seminary course in mythology. Our teacher actually began his first lecture by telling us a myth was a fictional story made up by people who didn't know the truth. He assured us that we had to learn these myths only because next year we were to study the classic British poets like Milton and Shakespeare, and if we didn't know the myths they employed, we wouldn't understand their works.

No wonder we have problems when scholars talk about biblical myths.

In a recent Commonweal article, John Garvey shared an interesting insight into this biblical genre. "Myth does not mean 'things that aren't true.' Rather, the 'language' of myth has to do with what is truly timeless. Myth is not bound by the limits of historical thinking, which deals with time-bound and passing phenomena. Myth is a witness to the fact that some things are true forever. Jesus told stories that are not historically true (the parable of the Prodigal Son, for example) but point us to enduring truths."

Given that insight, today's first and second readings could easily fall into the category of myth.

Unless we put our sacrifice of Isaac narrative into that genre, the story paints an extremely sadistic picture of Yahweh; someone who plays a horrible trick on two faithful disciples. Taken literally, this passage presumes Isaac's parents believe Abraham will return from Moriah without their beloved son.

A prophet probably composed this passage more than 2,700 years ago in the northern section of Israel. Part of Genesis' "Elohistic source," its author must constantly deal with readers who are giving into customs which draw them away from their interpersonal relationship with Yahweh. One of the major issues they confront is child sacrifice. We know from II Kings that even some Jewish kings made their children "pass through the fire" - a polite way of saying they sacrificed them to the pagan fertility gods.

No doubt, faithful Jews heard the taunts of their pagan neighbors: "We love our gods more than you love yours. We sacrifice our children to them." This is the background against which to hear today's Isaac story. In a mythic way, the author is saying we love Yahweh so much that we'd sacrifice our children if we were asked to do so. Just look at Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Yet the narrative eventually teaches Yahweh's a God of life, not death. That's what Garvey calls an "enduring truth." The author would be amazed that anyone would take this story literally.

Most scholars also believe Mark's transfiguration narrative is a biblical myth. Employing classic imagery from the Hebrew Scriptures, Mark presents Jesus as fulfilling the Chosen Peoples' dreams and hopes. In his transfigured mode, Jesus stands between Moses and Elijah - the law and the prophets: the phrase used in the Bible for the Bible. Peter's request to set up tents is an obvious reference to the feast of Tabernacles - a celebration looking forward to the day Yahweh will return in the midst of the people, just as Yahweh was present when they lived in tents during their Exodus wandering. Mark is telling us in a mythical way, "Jesus is the special person Israelites have been expecting for centuries. He's God-among-us."

Except for picturing Jesus at the right hand of God, Paul doesn't employ mythical language in our Romans passage. Calling a spade a spade, the Apostle graphically talks about God's concern for those who follow Jesus. "If God is for us, who can be against us, he who did not spare his own Son ... ? Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones?" It's nice to know God's constantly on our side.

On one hand, it's good to have such to the point biblical statements. But on the other hand, myths do make our faith more interesting, and certainly more memorable.

Roger Vermalen Karban

This commentary is provided by the FAITHFUL OF SOUTHERN ILLINOIS. Please share it with a friend. We appreciate your comments and donations.

F.O.S.I.L., BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222