

JUNE 24, 2012: FEAST OF THE JOHN THE BAPTIZER

Isaiah 48:1-6 Acts 13:22-26 Luke 1:57-66, 80

Those who think they know all about John the Baptizer - who he was and in what his mission consisted - probably know very little about him. If we're using our Christian Scriptures as the definitive source for his life and ministry, we're employing writers who are interested only in how he related to Jesus of Nazareth, their mentor, not how John would have looked at himself and his ministry.

Since the discovery of the first five Dead Sea Scrolls in the late 1940s, we're better able to place John in his actual historical environment. John seems to have been a member of the Qumran community which produced the scrolls; a group of Jews who had left Jerusalem in the century before Jesus' birth and settled in an area overlooking the Dead Sea. Convinced they were terribly wronged by the religious authorities, they presumed Yahweh wouldn't leave such a blatant injustice unpunished. God would triumphantly appear, fight alongside them to defeat their enemies and put their "Teacher of Righteousness" in his proper leadership position.

To demonstrate their sincerity, they faithfully read and copied their Scriptures, gave themselves over to a rigorous, self-sacrificing lifestyle, and underwent frequent baptisms - symbolically washing away anything on their part which would delay Yahweh's arrival.

John's ministry dovetails with Qumran. Among other things, he announces the imminent coming of Yahweh, the Lord, and prepares people for that event by administering a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." For Christians it's important to note that an obscure carpenter from Capernaum is one of those "turned on" by the Baptizer, eventually taking over his ministry when John is arrested and killed.

Scholars presume the historical Baptizer never realized Jesus was Yahweh. (That was one of the surprises awaiting him at the pearly gates.) When, during that fateful night, he was forced to put his head on the block, he probably thought his life had been a failure. Few Jews had actually repented; Yahweh hadn't come. He could certainly identify with Deutero-Isaiah's reflection on his own ministry. "... I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength"

Yet, this unnamed sixth century BCE prophet eventually began to understand, "My reward is with Yahweh, my recompense is with my God." His failure to convert the Jewish exiles in Babylon was actually one step toward opening the faith to the "nations" - the Gentiles.

Followers of Jesus would eventually regard John as the "precursor" of their leader; his ministry, the preparation for Jesus' ministry. As we hear in today's Acts pericope, our evangelists expressly have him revolve his ministry around the imminent arrival of the "... one coming after me." John's name will forever be joined to that of Jesus; his birth - as in today's gospel - put on a par with Jesus' birth.

Yet, when we look at the historical, not the gospel John we discover deep significance. Though it's good to hear how the Baptizer fit into God's overall plan of salvation, we presume he died not realizing what we hear in today's second and third readings. Like many of us, he thought he never accomplished the things God had planned for him. On many levels, he failed.

We can only see one small part of God's plan. And most of the time we're not even conceiving of that plan as God conceives of it. Like Deutero-Isaiah and John, we can only do what we think God's calling us to do. What we eventually accomplish, or how we fit into God's plan, we'll also only discover at the pearly gates.

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JULY 1, 2012: THIRTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24 II Corinthians 8:7, 9,13-15 Mark 5:21-43

Historians have always had problems pinpointing the forces behind Judaism's first century BCE leap into a belief in an afterlife. Before then, the Israelites presumed we'll be rewarded or punished in this life for what we do in this life. It's the only life we'll ever have.

Past scholars presumed some of our sacred authors had read the works of the classic Greek philosophers who believed in an afterlife. But there was no smoking gun. No would could be certain who had read whom, or when they read it. Then a little over 25 years ago, experts in Wisdom literature, like the late Fr. Roland Murphy, began to realize the smoking gun had always been before their eyes - in today's first reading. The Wisdom author mentions, "Justice is undying."

"Justice" is the biblical word describing the proper relationship we're to have with God and those around us. These few words help us understand how Jews came up with the insight that we can live forever. Our sacred writer first presumes God is eternal, then reasons that if we have a correct relationship with God, God can and will continue that relationship after we die. In that case, we'll also live into eternity. Pagan Greeks had no input into the biblical idea of an afterlife. Jews figured it out all by themselves, based on their own faith.

It's significant that faith - not philosophy - is the force behind our belief in an afterlife. Technically faith is the force behind everything we do. Mark effectively demonstrates this in today's gospel pericope.

The evangelist here employs a classic literary device to show a passage of time: he introduces one story, interrupts it with another, then returns to the first. In both stories, the subject matter is the same. He already did this in chapter 3. Jesus' family sets out to take him under control because they think he's out of his mind. Mark then inserts a narrative about other people thinking Jesus has a demon in him. Then he returns to the first story, mentioning Jesus' mother and brothers finally arrived.

In today's passage, the topic is faith. It took lots of faith (and courage) for Jairus, a synagogue official, to ask a radical, itinerant preacher for a favor; even more faith when he discovers his daughter has already died before Jesus' arrival. In a parallel way, though a mob is "pressing" upon Jesus, only one person touches him with faith. Jesus tells the healed woman, "Your faith has saved you!" and encourages the distraught father, "Do not be afraid. Just have faith!" Following Jesus always revolves around faith. Only those who can use faith to reach beyond the present and move toward a world yet to be experienced can be his disciples.

Perhaps one of the most overlooks parts of the hemorrhaging woman miracle is Mark's comment that Jesus realized "power had gone out of him." Most of us think Jesus worked miracles by just snapping his finger or saying a few special words. We don't appreciate that miraculous actions drained Jesus of his physical strength. I presume that means if we, his followers, are to imitate Jesus' faith, then we can expect some of our strength also to be drained.

Paul, in our II Corinthians reading, carries such faith over into draining some of his community's financial strength. "... As a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply (others') needs...." Such generosity is one of the ways the Apostle presumes his community "excels" in faith.

Given the insight of our Wisdom author, we who work at achieving eternal justice must be willing to drain ourselves for the sake of God and those around us. Only the faith-filled weak will truly imitate Jesus' justice.

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