

NOVEMBER 25, 2012: CHRIST THE KING
Daniel 7:13-14 Revelation 1:5-8 John 18:33b-27

I once was asked to preside at a Catholic school Eucharist that revolved around the theme of Christ the King. Taking nothing for granted, I began my homily by asking the students what they thought of when they heard the word king. Was I surprised!

Hands immediately went up all over the place. "It's someone who's the head of gang who kills people from other gangs," said one eighth grader. "It's a person who wears fancy clothes and always makes other people bow down to them," said another. Of course, there also were the obvious comparisons to Elvis. But in the end, no one was even close to the Eucharistic theme's definition.

My experience shouldn't be a surprise. This king-stuff applied to Jesus has been touchy from the very beginning. As we know from other gospels, when Pilate asks him about being king, he usually denies it. Today, in John, he gives a new definition of the term. Though we like to think of him in terms of Daniel's "son of man," receiving "dominion, glory, and kingship," such an image would have created huge problems during the ministry of the historical Jesus and in the first centuries of the risen Jesus. The empire already had a king: Caesar. Anyone else claiming the title would have been put to death for fomenting treason and revolt. It was a title one didn't normally mess with - unless one was willing to pay the price.

The biblical Christian community faced a problem when it zeroed in on Jesus' leadership of that community. Though his followers were convinced he was "in charge," and that the ultimate persons in charge in civil society were kings, Jesus certainly didn't mirror their style of leadership. If anyone dared refer to him as a king, they quickly had to provide a different definition of the title. In other words, they'd say, "He's our king, but he's not like any king we've ever known."

Both John and the author of Revelation do precisely that. Each is convinced Jesus' leadership style runs counter to anything they've ever before experienced. Kings normally concentrate on themselves; Jesus concentrates on the community.

No doubt the author of Revelation regards Jesus as the leader of leaders. He even refers to him as the "ruler of the kings of the earth." Yet at the same time, the writer's job description of this ruler revolves around his making "... us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father." In Jesus' reign, the spotlight is on us, not him. His success as a leader is grounded in pointing out the importance of each one of us.

John's Jesus says something parallel in our gospel pericope. Pilate can't understand Jesus' kingship because Pilate's definition of the title is limited to his experiences of this world. The procurator is dealing with someone determined to bring about a different world, a kingdom at odds with this world's value system, a kingdom based on the truth he's been proclaiming throughout his ministry. As Jesus stated during his last supper discourse, his followers are "friends," not slaves - a "truth" most earthly leaders had yet to surface.

As any historian knows, through the centuries, institutional church leaders, following the experience of the historical and risen Jesus, have also appropriated titles from civil society. But unlike the historical and risen Jesus, many didn't change the original definition of those titles when they applied them to themselves. In some situations, they were convinced their "kingdom" actually belonged to this world. We still have a long way to go before we return to the radical, all-are-important vision of our original leader.

DECEMBER 2, 2012: FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
Jeremiah 33:14-16 I Thessalonians 3:12-4:2 Luke 21:25-38, 34-36

Luke seems to be the first Christian author to presume he and his readers will all die a natural death before Jesus returns in the Parousia. This delayed Second Coming forced one of the two basic changes which took place in Christianity's first century. Jesus' second and third generation followers had to switch from looking at their faith as a short-term experience to a life-time commitment. What they once believed to be just around the corner was now in the distant, distant future. This appears to be one of the reasons Luke is so concerned with vigilance. Though we know from other parts of Luke/Acts that the evangelist is convinced the odds are against Jesus' imminent Parousia, Christians still can't put their expectations for the event on a back burner and forget about it.

"Beware," Luke's Jesus warns, "that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a thief. Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man."

As I mentioned two weeks ago, in the gospel projections of the end of the world, unlike those in the book of Revelation, Jesus doesn't cause the "tribulations." They're simply part of the human experience all of us must endure before his Second Coming. Yet, in the midst of all our natural problems and tensions, Christians still keep focused on the risen Jesus' presence in their lives. Being alert to his presence is the distinguishing characteristic of our personalities.

Years before Luke encouraged his readers to adjust to a long-term faith, that same vigilance led Paul of Tarsus to make the other basic change in early Christianity: the switch from a Jewish church to a Gentile church. Like all Jesus' first followers, the Apostle was a Jew. Since the historical Jesus, a Jew, was a reformer of Judaism, who except Jews would want to be his disciples?

Yet, as Paul tells us in his letters, the insight that the risen Jesus was different from the historical Jesus quickly developed in those Jewish followers. The risen Jesus is a "new creation," someone not restricted by the limits within which the historical Jesus ministered. As Paul reminded his community in Galatia, the risen Jesus isn't slave or free, Jew or Gentile, male or female.

Paul's alertness to that Jew/Gentile insight eventually forced him to realize someone didn't have to be Jewish in order to be another Christ. That's why I Thessalonians is such an important document. Not only is it the earliest Christian writing we possess, it also contains Paul's reaction to his belief that non-Jews could mirror the risen Jesus in their non-Jewish communities. They could do this without following the 613 laws of Moses.

Though I presume Paul was confident his new "evangelization" would work, nothing can compare with discovering that it actually does work. His Gentile Thessalonian community provided the proof. They surfaced the risen Jesus in their midst not by worrying about Jewish dietary regulations, but by "increasing and abounding in love for one another and all." Vigilant to the needs of all, they experienced Jesus in all.

Followers of Jesus can certainly identify with Jeremiah's vision of a better future. But as the prophet states, we can only do this because we imitate a God of "justice" - a God who builds proper relationships with everyone.

Our hope for a new world doesn't just revolve around Jesus' triumphant return. It's rooted in our being aware of what he wants us do right here and now, in our relations with others, long before his Parousia.