

OCTOBER 6, 2013: TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4 II Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14 Luke 17:5-10

We often misunderstand what biblical faith is all about. We think of it as believing in specific doctrines or dogmas, in a certain package of "truths," like, "I believe in the Trinity," or "I believe the Catholic church is the one, true church." Frequently when asked what we believe, we instinctively recite the Nicene or the Apostles' Creed. Our sacred authors, on the other hand, encourage us not to believe in things, but to believe in a person, to share the hopes and dreams of a particular individual, even when it seems those hopes and dreams will never be realized.

That certainly seems to be the case with the late 7th century BCE prophet Habakkuk. We're not exactly certain about the precise "violence, destruction, strife and clamorous discord" he and his community were experiencing. But it was deeply disrupting their faith in Yahweh. How could God be tolerating such a drastic change in God's plan for the Chosen People?

Yahweh never provides the prophet with an exact end-time for this painful period. Habakkuk is only told to "hang in there." God's vision for the community hasn't changed; its implementation has simply been delayed. "The vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late."

Active sometime in the last third of the first Christian century, the unknown author of II Timothy is facing a parallel problem. The earliest believers in Jesus expected him to return shortly after his death and resurrection. They hadn't counted on a long interval between those two events.

Writing in the name and tradition of Paul, our author is concerned that Jesus' delayed Parousia will cause the faithful to renege on carrying out all of Jesus' vision. Like Timothy, the readers of this letter are encouraged to "stir into flame the gift of God that you have" Being another Christ isn't for sissies. "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control.... Bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God." The risen Jesus expects us to do what's necessary to carry out his/her dream, even though that dream isn't going to be fulfilled in the near future.

Luke's Jesus encourages us to do the same. Just a little faith in implementing Jesus' vision will symbolically help us to "uproot" trees in Jesus' name. Yet, at this point in salvation history, one of our main tasks is just keeping that faith alive.

The evangelist is convinced Jesus will eventually return, though it won't be in his or his readers' lifetime. But in the meantime, we, like good slaves, must be committed to carrying out whatever the "master" has commanded us to do. If we plan on one day eating at Jesus' table, we also must plan on doing what we're "obliged to do" between now and that glorious, heavenly banquet.

Over nineteen centuries later, we're still waiting for Jesus' return. The delay has bogged many of down in "churchy trivia." We've so concentrated our efforts on the small "things" of faith that we've forgotten Jesus' big picture: his dream for all people and all creation. It's much easier being Christians that way; doesn't take a lot of courage or effort.

Yet, every weekend when our Eucharistic Scriptures are proclaimed, we don't hear about rosaries, novenas or perpetual adoration. We hear a vision proclaimed, a vision we commit ourselves to carry out every time we take from the Eucharistic cup; the vision of that person in whom we have faith.

OCTOBER 13, 2013: TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

II Kings 5:14-17 II Timothy 2:8-13 Luke 17:11-19

As I mentioned last week, biblical faith revolves around faith not in things, but in a person, and the vision that person has for changing this world. This week our readings continue that idea, but they also emphasize pushing the limits which restrict that vision from being realized.

The unknown author of II Timothy sets the theme. "... The word of God is not chained. Therefore I bear with everything for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, together with eternal glory."

The disciple of the Apostle to the Gentiles who is responsible for this letter is gifted with his mentor's passion to spread the dream of the risen Jesus beyond Judaism to all people. Paul was convinced that non-Jews are just as called to be other Christs as Jews are. Of course, such a pushing of the envelope caused many problems for Paul, even, according to some scholars, leading to his martyrdom. Yet, both Paul and our writer were convinced that the suffering which came from pushing those limits was an essential part of the dying and rising which followers of Jesus should expect to experience. "If we have died with him we shall also live with him; if we persevere we shall also reign with him."

We especially see limits being pushed in today's II Kings pericope. Not only does the prophet Elisha go beyond "accepted religion" by healing a Gentile leper, Naaman, but once healed, this Syrian army officer pleads with the prophet to permit him to also be a devotee of Yahweh. There's just one problem: Naaman doesn't live in the Holy Land.

According to the theological limits of that day and age, all gods, including Yahweh, were "territorial." They were only gods of a specific piece of geography. Yahweh, for instance, was literally the God only of Israel. Take one step across the border and Yahweh was unable to help you.

Naaman pushes the limits by asking Elisha for "two mule-loads of earth." His plan: to take that Jewish dirt, spread it around his property back in Damascus, and create an "annex" of Israel miles away from Yahweh's territory. He reasons that if he prays to Yahweh on Israelite soil, Yahweh must listen to him, thereby creating a loophole in traditional theology.

It's also important that the sacred author mentions the prophet refuses to take a "stipend or stole fee" for healing Naaman's leprosy. According to biblical beliefs, had he accepted Naaman's gift, Elisha would have been saying, "I did it; not Yahweh." An outward sign God was present and working effectively in our world was that the salvation Yahweh provided came with "no charge." No one was permitted to make a living from channeling God's saving actions. As Elisha's servant Gehazi later tragically discovers, that envelope had no loopholes.

Jesus curing a Samaritan leper in today's gospel passage isn't quite as radical as Elisha's cure of Naaman. The Samaritan was at least a Jew, though a heretic. Luke is more concerned with the actions of the Samaritan after the healing. "Realizing he had been healed, he returned, glorifying God in a loud voice; and he fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him;" something the other nine "orthodox" Jewish lepers forgot to do. One can never predict what will happen when the envelope is pushed.

Not since the short days of John Paul I and the brief reign of John XXIII have we had a pope who pushes those limits like Francis does today. The "faithful" never know what to expect. Perhaps the uncertainty his actions create is part of our dying with Jesus.