

APRIL 13, 2014: PASSION SUNDAY
Isaiah 50:4-7 Philippians 2:6-11 Matthew 26:14-27:66

The late Carroll Stuhlmueller always stressed that the best biblical definition of a follower of God is contained in today's first reading. Reflecting on his prophetic ministry in his third Song of the Suffering Servant, Deutero-Isaiah mentions, "Morning after morning Yahweh opens my ear that I may hear."

According to Stuhlmueller, true disciples hit the floor every morning with ears wide open, listening for what God is asking of them today that God didn't ask of them yesterday. The well-known and loved Scripture scholar also mentioned that the Hebrew word for "open" which the prophet uses here is the same word our sacred authors normally employ when they're talking about someone drilling out a well. It implies God's opening of our ears is a rather violent process.

As the song continues, it's clear that those whose ears are open are in for a lot of suffering.

Both Paul and Matthew agree.

In his famous Philippians "emptying" hymn the Apostle recalls how Jesus' listening to and carrying out God's word eventually led to his death.

Matthew's Passion Narrative certainly dovetails with Paul's insight about Jesus' humbling himself. But, as I always point out, none of our four Passion Narratives stresses Jesus' physical suffering. We Catholics especially must distinguish what we learned about Jesus' suffering and death from the Stations of the Cross from what we learned from the gospels. There's nothing for instance about Jesus' three falls in Scripture, the gospels never mention him meeting his mother or Veronica, and in no description of his actual crucifixion is it ever mentioned that he was nailed to the cross. (He could have been roped.)

Even Mel Gibson, in defending the gory scenes in his movie *The Passion of the Christ*, eventually had to admit that much of what he put on the screen came from private visions, not from the gospels.

Jesus certainly suffers in today's gospel, but almost always, it's more psychological than physical. He must endure betrayal by a best friend, his disciples' constant misunderstandings, their inability to just "watch and pray" with him, and the horrible experience of seeing his followers run away when he most needs them.

Things get psychologically worse as the narrative continues. Jesus is unjustly condemned to death by his fellow Jews, the Passover crowd chooses a murderer over him, the Roman governor first declares him innocent, then hands him over to be crucified, the person he put in charge of his followers denies he even knows him, and in the end, the only people who identify with him are some of his women disciples "looking on from a distance." When this former Galilean carpenter first began listening, shuttered his job and embarked on his itinerant preaching ministry, I don't think he had any idea of the psychological suffering it would entail.

The reason our evangelists downplay Jesus' physical suffering is clear: they're writing for people whose imitation of Jesus entails much more psychological suffering than physical. If they're serious about becoming other Christs, they'd best check their pain threshold.

Though, as far as I can tell, no gospel writer ever saw a segment of Hogan's Heroes, I'm certain they presumed there were many in their communities who could play the role of Sergeant Schultz; they especially had no problem echoing his best-known line, "I hear nothing!"

Our Scriptures were composed for people with open ears, people who listen every day to what God is asking of them. Holy Week is for listeners, those willing to become one with Jesus psychologically. On Easter Sunday morning, it might be good to reflect on what God told us this Holy Week that we didn't hear last year.

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APRIL 17, 2014: HOLY THURSDAY
Eucharist of the Lord's Supper
Exodus 12:1-8,11-14 I Corinthians 11:23-26 John 13:1-15

One of the obstacles to understanding the true significance of tonight's celebration revolves around our Catholic belief in Jesus' "generic" presence in the Blessed Sacrament. We presume the only thing necessary for Jesus to become present in the Eucharistic bread and wine is for a properly ordained priest to say the exact prescribed words over the correct elements in the context of a valid Mass. Once that event takes place, Jesus is present in the bread and wine until those elements cease to be bread and wine. Like most of you, I was taught as a child that the biggest differences between Catholic churches and Protestant churches was the presence of Jesus in the tabernacles of the former. That's why we boys - almost under pain of venial sin - were expected to tip our hats when we passed any Catholic church.

But it wasn't always that way.

Those who visit Rome's oldest churches discover they originally had no tabernacles. At most, some might have a little compartment close to the main door in which some of the consecrated bread was kept for those who would carry it to the community's sick or imprisoned. But not only are those compartments in out of the way places, there's normally no space around them for the faithful to gather for prayer or adoration.

Shortly before his death, Karl Rahner stated his conviction that the earliest Christians believed Jesus was only present in the Eucharistic bread and wine for as long as the community was present. Though this well-known theologian never denied Jesus' presence in our churches' tabernacles long after the Eucharistic celebration ends, he became convinced that such a belief only became widespread centuries after Jesus' death and resurrection. Our Christian sacred authors seem not to have known about it.

That's one of the reasons Paul and John wrote tonight's second and third readings. Each presumes the risen Jesus only becomes present when those who celebrate the Eucharist recognize his presence in one another. They were much more concerned with recognizing than with rituals.

Of course, there's a problem in experiencing the risen Jesus in one another: it often takes a death to pull that off. The wealthy in Corinth, for instance, had no difficulty surfacing Jesus in the well-to-do members of the community who brought food and drink to the pot-luck Eucharistic meal. On the other hand, they were blind to that same presence in the community's "free-loading" poor and slaves who could contribute little or nothing to the celebration. That's why the Apostle is forced to remind his readers, "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes." In other words, "This meal is only for those - like Jesus - who are willing to die enough to themselves to become completely one with everyone around them." No death; no Jesus.

Forty years later, John's Jesus addresses the same basic problem. Some of his Last Supper followers, personified by Peter, refuse to give themselves over to serving all in the community, especially in situations when, like Jesus, they're not in total control of that service. No wonder Jesus informs the leader of his community, "It's my way or the highway!"

Only one of our three Last Supper traditions (Mark) places the event in the context of a Passover meal, Paul or John don't. Those who follow their Eucharistic theology, eventually discover that if we're to experience the freedom our covenant with Jesus provides, it's a freedom that comes only to those willing to die to themselves during their participation in the Lord's Supper. If they don't buy into that theology, they'd better stick to worshiping Jesus in the tabernacle.