

JUNE 29, 2014: FEAST OF PETER AND PAUL
Acts 12:1-11 II Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18 Matthew 16:13-19

Even Catholic Scripture scholars agree that the biblical role of Peter isn't to be the first pope; it's to be a witness to Jesus' resurrection.

Accustomed to hearing Jesus' well-known words to Peter against the background of the hierarchical church structure which we've created through the centuries, it's difficult to put ourselves in the place of Matthew's original readers: Jewish/Christians who had a frame of mind about Jesus and his church different from that which most of us Gentile/Christians have.

The majority of commentators on Matthew's gospel are convinced the evangelist and his community were still expecting Jesus' Parousia in their lifetime. So they'd have little reason to expect "their Jesus" to set up a structure that would guarantee their existence for thousands of years down the road. Along with most of Jesus' earliest followers, they were much more interested in the here and now than in the distant future.

But even more important, as I mentioned above, they were Jews; Israelites who hadn't given up their religion when they bought into the reforms Jesus preached. None of them believed this Capernaum carpenter had created a new religion. He simply had created a new way of looking at and living the Jewish religion they already professed.

Unlike most of their fellow Jews who, at the most regarded Jesus to be just another prophet, they, following the lead of Peter, believed him to be "the Christ, the Son of the living God." This unique belief in the presence of the living God among them was the "rock" on which their Christian community was built, the guarantee that the "gates of the nether world" would never wipe them out. They would always be able to overcome any evil that would confront them.

But that faith would also enable Peter (and later in chapter 18, the whole community) to know what to "bind and loose." Just like their Jewish proto-rabbis, those who believed in the presence of the risen Jesus could definitively determine which of the 613 Laws of Moses applied to them and which didn't. Their faith was the key which opened the "kingdom of heaven" for them.

In Matthew's gospel, the kingdom of heaven normally doesn't refer to the place we're planning to inhabit after our physical deaths. The phrase parallels Mark's "kingdom of God." (As a good Jew, Matthew tries to avoid using the word God.) It's the gospel Jesus' way of talking about God working effectively in our lives right here and now. The necessity to surface that presence is at the heart of Jesus' preaching. But after his own death and resurrection, his followers also employed it to describe their faith in the risen Jesus working effectively in their daily lives. It's that faith which enabled them to look at everyone and everything from a different perspective, the rock which gave stability to their lives.

Instead of setting up the papacy, Matthew's Jesus is setting up a way of living one's faith.

Luke agrees with Matthew. Those who preach the risen Jesus will be saved from annihilation by the risen Jesus. Today's Acts narrative about Peter being delivered from Herod's clutches is classic. Nothing or no one, not even the forces of evil, will ever stop God's word from being proclaimed.

Following along the same trail, the disciple of Paul who composed his second Letter to Timothy saw in his mentor's life and martyrdom a practical example of his deep rooted Christian faith. "I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith."

Wouldn't it be great if someone could say similar words about us during our funeral than to simply mention, "He (or she) was a good Roman Catholic?"

JULY 6, 2014: FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Zechariah 9:9-10; Romans 8:9, 11-12; Matthew 11:25-30

Today's gospel passage deals with a question which early Christian communities frequently discussed: why do some people have faith and others don't?

Those who believed in the presence of the risen Jesus in their lives looked at reality in a different way from those who simply thought of this itinerant preacher as a dead Jewish prophet: someone who obviously believed the message he preached, died for his convictions, but was no longer around. Non-believers were convinced that believers were simply fantasizing when they spoke about their mentor in the present tense, and even went so far as to attempt to imitate his dying and rising.

Those who thought of themselves as "other Christs," for instance, would hear today's words of Zechariah and apply them to the life and ministry of Jesus. Though all Jews believed this post-exilic prophet was describing an ideal future king - someone powerful enough to destroy all Israel's enemies and bring peace even to the country's capital - Christians were certain Zechariah had the non-violent Jesus of Nazareth in mind when he spoke about this king's "dominion (being) from sea to sea." Those who gave themselves over to carrying on Jesus' ministry were convinced the world could be definitely changed only by love, not by brute force. Though everyone longed for peace, Christians were dedicated to a rather unique way of bringing it about.

What stopped other people from sharing their beliefs?

Paul believed this difference in vision revolved around the Holy Spirit's presence in the lives of Jesus' followers. "You are not in the flesh," the Apostle reminds the community in Rome. "On the contrary, you are in the spirit." He goes on to explain, "Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. . . . For if you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

Christians believe they have a different source of life than non-believers: the same Spirit which enlivens the risen Jesus. This divine force enables them to see reality through different eyes. Though most humans see things in 2-D, disciples of Jesus see them in 3-D. They surface a dimension which others don't even know exists. Paul believes no one can pull this off by themselves.

Matthew's Jesus carries the uniqueness of Christian believers one step further. In composing their gospels, both Matthew and Luke copied from a writing no one's seen for at least 17 centuries: a scroll containing sayings of Jesus which scholars simply refer to as the "Q." The first verses of today's gospel pericope comes from that lost document, especially the line thanking God for "hiding these things from the wise and learned and revealing them to the childlike." This saying was important enough to have been written down and saved by some of Jesus' first followers, and later copied into two of our four gospels.

All who "labor and are burdened" constantly look for rest. Christians find that rest in their Jesus-imitating service of others. Though the risen Jesus puts an easy yoke and light burden on his followers, he reserves that burden and yoke for the "childlike." Only those who approach life with a child's open-minded personality can expect to notice God working in their lives. The "wise and the learned" often close their minds and eyes to the new things God is constantly accomplishing.

The Q document's Jesus is convinced that only people open to life's daily "newness" will ever develop a faith which permits them to experience God and the risen Jesus in their lives; an aspect of belief which the true faithful have never lost.