

**AUGUST 10, 2014: NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR**

**I Kings 19:9a, 11-13a    Romans 9:1-5    Matthew 14:22-33**

Serious students of Scripture notice once the Chosen People leave Mt Sinai during their trek through the wilderness, only one person ever returns to that sacred place. And when he does, Yahweh tells him to leave.

Today's I Kings passage only makes sense when we understand it's just a small part of a whole narrative. We're missing the beginning and end. Elijah had recently executed Queen Jezebel's prophets of Ba'al on Mt. Carmel, causing her to put out a contract on his life. The prophet does what any man would do in the face of an irate woman: he runs – all the way from the north of Israel to the south. When he reaches the Sinai border, he pleads with Yahweh to take his life; he's had it. But Yahweh instead sends an angel with food and water enabling Elijah to walk "forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb (Sinai.)"

It's here that today's liturgical selection kicks in. Yahweh eventually communicates with the prophet "in a tiny whispering sound." Though the means of communication might be consoling, God's message certainly wasn't. The meeting ends with Yahweh telling Elijah to leave this sacred place, and go up to Damascus to start a process which will terminate Jezebel's reign. By detouring to Sinai, instead of going directly to Damascus, the prophet had walked hundreds of miles out of his way - with Yahweh's help! No wonder this is one of the most interesting passages in all of Scripture.

It's clear that biblical Israelites didn't feel compelled to conduct yearly pilgrimages to Mt. Sinai. Though wonderful things had once taken place at that specific geographical location, the Chosen People were convinced Yahweh was still doing wonderful things no matter where they were located. If they insisted on returning to Sinai, they might overlook what was transpiring in downtown Jerusalem.

Yet that God-given food and water still bothers me. Why did Yahweh help Elijah to go someplace he shouldn't have gone? Perhaps we only understand this when we reflect on some of the direction changes we've been called upon to make during our lives of faith – changes from paths we had once presumed God wanted, and helped us to walk.

We hear Paul reflecting on this topic in today's Romans pericope. Why do so many of his fellow Jews refuse to go down the path he's now on? With all the privileges they've received through the centuries, why can't they see the turn in the road through which Jesus is leading them? I presume thoughts like these are frequently keeping the Apostle awake at night.

Matthew might be providing us a way to understand such changes in direction. Peter begins to sink only because he breaks his concentration on Jesus. "When he saw how strong the wind was he became frightened, and, beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!'" Jesus immediately takes his hand and says the passage's most important words, "Of you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Just as Elijah's faith basically revolved around his relationship with Yahweh, so our faith revolves around our relationship with the risen Jesus. Anyone committed to a relationship with another human being can testify that changes in direction are frequently an essential part of maintaining and building that relationship. Though the relationship began with a commitment to do things one way, that way eventually changed.

Those of us who experienced the church before and after Vatican II certainly understand the necessity to change directions in our life of faith. We can only join Paul in lamenting the fact that so many of our fellow Catholics have found that change so difficult to achieve. Perhaps some have broken their concentration on the risen Jesus among us.

**AUGUST 17, 2014: TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR**  
**Isaiah 56:1, 6-7    Romans 11:13-15, 29-32    Matthew 15:21-28**

The world would be an ideal place to inhabit if everyone were the same. But they aren't. That's why our sacred authors frequently have to deal with those "others:" individuals who don't fit the mold in which we were either created or later became. How are we to relate to people who don't share our ethnic or cultural background or even our beliefs?

Our biblical prophets often have to deal with the fact that most people on this planet aren't Jews. If God only entered into the Sinai covenant with Israelites, does that mean Yahweh has nothing to do with Gentiles? Are they totally "on their own?" Do they have to depend solely on their own gods and goddesses? Most pre-exilic prophets presume that's the case. But such an easy to understand theological opinion goes out the biblical window once Deutero-Isaiah insists on strict monotheism in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. After the Babylonian Exile Jews are forced to presume Yahweh's everyone's God.

Third-Isaiah, the author of today's first reading, deals with that new insight. Active in the first part of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, this prophet is not only encouraging those Jews still in Babylon to return to the Promised Land and rebuild Jerusalem and its temple, he's also insisting they look at that task through new eyes. Yahweh's now inviting non-Jews to be part of a covenant originally entered into with only Jews. "The foreigners who join themselves to Yahweh . . . and hold to my covenant, them will I bring to my holy mountain and make joyful in my house of prayer: . . . for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." Many in the prophet's audience probably went home muttering, "There goes the neighborhood."

Matthew's Jewish/Christian community faced a similar problem: the entry of Gentiles into the church as Gentiles. These non-Jewish converts weren't being burdened with the 613 Laws of Moses which all Jewish/Christians were committed to keep. What were these Johnnies-come-lately actually obligated to do? Today's pericope supplies one answer: simply have faith in Jesus.

A Canaanite woman in first century CE Palestine would parallel a Palestinian in 21<sup>st</sup> century Israel; not the most welcome individual in that particular place. Canaanites are the remnant of the people the Israelites conquered when they invaded Canaan eleven centuries before. Though Matthew "waters down" the narrative he copies from Mark, his Jesus still implicitly calls the woman by a title many of his fellow Jews employed for such undesirables: a dog.

Unlike Mark, Matthew turns the encounter into a test of faith. The line we always remember is the last thing Jesus says: "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." Though Gentile/Christians don't have to worry about eating pork, keeping the Sabbath, or being circumcised, they're still expected to have the same faith in the risen Jesus present and working in their lives as Jewish/Christians have; the one essential for all other Christs.

It seems Jesus' earliest followers hadn't written off evangelizing Gentiles. They simply planned to first convert all their fellow Jews, then begin missions to non-Jews. Paul, seeing such a plan wasn't working, came up with a different one. As we hear in today's Romans passage, he was convinced that by bringing Gentiles to the faith first, their fulfilled and loving lives would make Jews so jealous they'd be crazy not to become Christians.

Of course, that plan didn't work either. The Apostle couldn't have foreseen how many Gentile/Christians would eventually integrate anti-Jewish practices into their faith. Considering the Inquisition and Holocaust, no wonder Jewish converts are so rare. Whatever happened to Third-Isaiah's "house of prayer for all peoples" dream?"