

MARCH 29, 2015: PALM SUNDAY

Mark, 11:1-10 Isaiah 50:4-7 Philippians 2:6-11 Mark 14:1-15:47

One of the most exciting things about being an early follower of Jesus was the surprises such discipleship entailed. Things didn't happen exactly the way they were anticipated; people didn't always turn out to be the individuals others thought they should be.

We hear the first surprise unfolding in the gospel passage proclaimed before we begin our annual procession into church. Mark describes an event which probably happened a half-dozen times on that particular day: a procession of pilgrims into Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Passover. These visitors begin their trek at the top of the Mount of Olives, taking in the panoramic view of the Holy City as they tear olive branches off nearby trees and throw their cloaks on the road to create a "via sacra." Some instantly break into singing Psalm 118, with everyone lustfully joining in the refrain: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of Yahweh!"

Though every pilgrim believed he or she was the one coming into Jerusalem in Yahweh's name, the evangelist was convinced that on this particular day, an itinerant preacher named Jesus of Nazareth was the person who actually merited that title.

But, if anyone dared think this carpenter could be the longed-for Messiah, he dashed their hopes by riding a donkey in the procession. In Jesus' day and age, the Messiah was thought to be a military figure, a person who would throw the hated Roman occupiers out of Palestine. That person would ride a horse, not a donkey through Jerusalem's gate. What a surprise!

Ten years before the first gospel was composed, Paul of Tarsus had already provided an unexpected – and disturbing – picture of Jesus, the Messiah. As he reminds his community in Philippi, though Jesus would eventually become "greatly exalted," he first "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." Certainly not the job description of a biblical Jewish Messiah.

Our first reading tells us that Jesus wasn't the first of Yahweh's surprises. Deutero-Isaiah - the prophet responsible for chapters 40-55 of Isaiah – experienced some of those surprises in his own person and ministry. In this Third Song of the Suffering Servant, the prophet reflects on some of what happened when Yahweh opened his ears every morning to hear what God expected of him on that particular day. Unlike many of his prophetic predecessors, he would be the comforter of his people, not their accuser. But though he consistently consoled them, they eventually tortured him, beating and spitting on him, even "plucking" the hairs of his beard. Not exactly the treatment a consoler would have expected from those he consoled.

But perhaps the biggest surprise today is reserved for us. Listen carefully as Mark's passion narrative is proclaimed. Notice that, contrary to our Stations of the Cross, he describes Jesus' psychological sufferings much more than his physical suffering. (He doesn't even tell us that Jesus was nailed to the cross.)

Mark has a good reason for doing this. He didn't compose these two chapters to have us "ooh and aah" over the physical pain Jesus endured to redeem us. His goal isn't just to show us how Jesus suffered and died for us, more than anything else, he wants to give us examples of how we, by imitating Jesus, are to die for others. Like our mentor, we're to be faithful to one another in spite of betrayals, desertions and denials. We're constantly to give ourselves even when that giving is rejected and ridiculed. And we're to be conscious of the pain of others much more than our own pain.

There's never an end to the surprises lurking in Scripture, and always popping up in our own lives when we actually try to imitate Jesus' dying and rising.

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APRIL 2, 2015: EUCHARIST OF THE LORD'S SUPPER
Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 I Corinthians 11:23-26 John 13:1-15

As we gather around the Lord's table this evening, we're not only remembering what Jesus said and did on the night before he historically died, we're also expected to reflect on what's going on in our own minds and hearts as we liturgically commemorate that event.

Especially tonight we can't forget the vast majority of our biblical authors wrote only when they surfaced problems in their communities. No one usually sat down on a beautiful spring day, when everything was going honky dory, and wrote his or her part of the Bible. If there weren't troubles in faith communities, we'd have no Bible.

Ironically tonight's I Corinthians 11 pericope provides us with the earliest biblical narrative of Jesus' Last Supper words and actions and our John 13 passage gives us the last biblical narrative of that same event. The former was written in the late 50s; the latter in the mid-90s. Though 45 years separate these two writings, the problem prompting both authors to write was the same: a failure by some in the community to recognize the risen Jesus present and active in all those participating in every celebration of the Lord's Supper.

We can only speculate how our Christian Scriptures would read if they were written today instead of 2,000 years ago. What problems would our modern sacred authors be addressing that our faith ancestors didn't encounter? When it comes to the Eucharist, for instance, our church authorities have recently been concerned with the number of Catholic teenagers who have difficulty believing the risen Jesus is "transubstantially" present in the Eucharistic bread and wine. Some think he/she's just symbolically present. I'm certain the Last Supper Jesus portrayed in any writing approved by today's "official" church would make some statements emphatically supporting the Catholic theology of transubstantiation.

Yet as we hear in today's first and third readings, first century Christians weren't worried about the consequences of how Jesus was present in the bread and wine. They were more concerned with the implications of ignoring his/her presence in all who were committed to imitating his dying and rising. Paul is disturbed because the wealthy in Corinth are refusing to share their Eucharistic food and drink with the poor; John is worried about the reluctance of some in his community to serve the needs of others, especially when they can't be in control of the way they serve them. In each situation, people who claimed to be other Christs were completely overlooking the presence of the risen Jesus in the poor and the needy. It simply cost too much for them to become one with everyone who gathered for the Lord's Supper.

No wonder we Catholic Christians eventually shifted our focus from Jesus present in one another to Jesus present in the bread and wine. It costs far less. Believing Jesus is transubstantially present in the Eucharistic bread and wine doesn't demand much of me on a practical level. Once I decide to believe it, I'll probably continue to go about my daily life in pretty much the same way I went about living that life before. But being convinced that he/she is actually present in people who don't look like me, think like me, or even share my theology, not only takes a real act of faith, it forces me to change the way I look at everything and everyone around me, and even alters the way I relate to the person standing next to me during tonight's Eucharist.

As we hear in our first reading, the yearly celebration of Passover helps all Jews remember they're free, delivered from slavery by Yahweh. The Christian celebration of the Lord's Supper should force all other Christs to remember they're one people, formed into one body of Christ by Jesus' death and resurrection.

As I mentioned in my commentary for the First Sunday of Lent, when we take from the cup tonight, we're stating publicly that we're determined to carry on the ministry of Jesus. Such a commitment entails making Jesus' frame of mind our frame of mind. I presume there were some men and women sitting around that Jerusalem Last Supper table with whom Jesus also had a difficult time identifying. Yet he did, and expects us to also do the same, no matter the problems it creates.