

NOVEMBER 27TH, 2016: FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 2:1-5 Romans 13:11-14 Matthew 24:37-44

Biblical followers of God live in the middle of the tension between what's actually happening in their lives right now and what they expect to happen in the future.

Over the centuries some religious leaders have been accused of focusing their people's eyes so intently on the future that they conveniently ignored the painful here and now of their daily lives, a here and now they should – and could – have changed. They didn't lift a finger, for instance, to help eradicate slavery. They simply taught that there'd be no slaves in heaven.

The prophet First Isaiah could never be blamed for employing that maneuver to avoid responsibility for the world's problems. Though in today's first reading he speaks about an ideal future, he was active during a period in biblical history in which no one believed in an after-life as we do today. Isaiah's ideal future was restricted to the confines of this life.

That's why the prophet is so concrete when he speaks about that longed-for future. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares," he proclaims, "and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another." There's no eternal bliss waiting for anyone in heaven. We can only hope for peace and tranquility right here and now.

Yet there's a condition for acquiring this peace and tranquility. We must be open to hearing God instructing us in his paths and walk in his ways. The problem is that some people hear God's word and carry it out, while others go through life without even noticing the path God expects them to travel. Our sacred authors presume this awareness – or lack of it - effects both our here and now and our future. But the question remains: why do some hear while others don't?

It's clear from today's gospel pericope that the early Christian community frequently reflected on that same question. Though Matthew projects this query into the future Parousia – Jesus' Second Coming – many Scripture scholars believe this passage originally revolved around the situation many Christians encountered in their daily lives. How come two people from the same background – even the same family – have different reactions to Jesus' message? Two men will be the field, two women grinding at the same mill; one will be *taken* by Jesus, the other won't. The only way to explain it is that one was awake to what was happening around him or her; the other wasn't.

Just as someone pre-warned that a robber was going to hit their house tonight "would . . . stay awake and not let his house be broken into," so we've been pre-warned that the Son of Man is coming, not only in his Parousia, but also in our day by day lives. Psychologists often mention that unless we're actually looking for someone or something, we won't recognize them when they actually arrive. Staying awake is key to carrying on the risen Jesus' ministry.

That appears to be one of the reasons Paul zeroes in on the same theme in today's Romans passage. "It is the hour now for you to awake from sleep," he writes, "for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed." Scripture scholars point out that biblical salvation isn't just something which will start after our physical deaths; it also begins right now, whenever we die to ourselves, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provisions for the desires of the flesh."

As other Christs we're expected to challenge the same unjust situations the historical Jesus challenged. Those who believe everything in this world is just going along hunky dory have obviously forgotten to set their alarm clocks.

DECEMBER 4TH, 2016: SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 11:1-10 Romans 15:4-9 Matthew 3:1-12

By far, the most important section of today's Isaiah reading is the line, ". . . The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of Yahweh as water covers the sea." But the key to appreciating its importance revolves around being aware of the ancient Hebrew meaning of the words "knowledge" or "know."

Our biblical authors normally employ know or knowledge when they're talking about a person actually *experiencing* someone or something. It implies a far deeper relationship than just having a casual familiarity with persons or things, like I know the times tables, or I know him when I see him. When the word is biblically used in the context of men and women knowing one another – as in "Adam *knew* his wife Eve," or in Luke's annunciation pericope, "How can this be since I do not *know* man?" – it usually implies sexual intimacy.

So when the prophet speaks about the earth being filled with the knowledge of Yahweh, he's basically sharing his conviction that all of us one day will experience Yahweh's presence in everything and everyone we encounter. God will be as much a part of us as water is a part of the sea. For those who have that God-experience everything will change; even natural enemies will become friends.

Yet at this point in salvation history (8th century BCE), Isaiah is still locked into the Jewish monarchy. He believes it's through one of the country's kings that Yahweh's presence eventually will become an everyday experience. That's why he spends so much time enumerating the gifts such a unique sprout from the stump of Jesse will possess. (By the way, it's from this passage that we got six of the seven gifts of the Spirit we had to memorize in our Confirmation classes, not from any of Paul's lists of the Spirit's gifts!)

By the time Jesus of Nazareth was about to begin his public ministry, most Jews had given up on one particular king creating an ideal God-present age. A few centuries before this itinerant preacher shuttered his Capernaum carpenter shop, they started to believe Yahweh was going to step outside the reigning monarchy and send a special "Messiah" who would usher in this longed-for day and age. That's why Matthew's John the Baptizer is forced to set people straight, emphatically informing them he's not that special person; he's just preparing the way for him.

But even if we believe Jesus is the Messiah, we can never forget his basic "stump speech." He's not going to bring about God's presence, he's simply announcing that God is already present. Remember the first words of his public ministry: "The kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe in the good news!" In other words, "Why are you still waiting for something that's already here? You simply have to change your value system and you'll notice God working effectively in your everyday lives!"

Our earliest Christian writer, Paul, presumes his readers in Rome have already gone through such a value changing repentance. The eyes through which they filter everything happening around them constantly surface God's presence and actions. That's why, as Isaiah prophesied, they can experience the unity between people who traditionally were opposed to one another; especially the oneness between Gentiles and Jews. Jesus' ministry of helping people recognize God working in all people has made it possible to experience God in all people, even in natural enemies.

Often, especially during Advent, it seems we're still passively expecting God to enter our lives, instead of being committed to living the way Jesus of Nazareth thought necessary to recognize that God's already here. Perhaps a change in our value system is simply too much to expect.

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