

AUGUST 6, 2017: TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 II Peter 1:16-19 Matthew 17:1-9

One of my favorite “stories” comes from a Protestant Scripture scholar. He and his family once toured a pre-Revolutionary-War home in New England. As they were passing through the living room he spied a centuries-old musket hanging above the fireplace. An avid gun collector, he spontaneously reached up and reverently touched its stock.

“Don’t touch that gun!” the tour guide yelled.

He immediately assured her he wasn’t going to harm it.

“I’m not worried about you harming the gun,” she replied. “I’m worried about the gun harming you. It’s loaded!”

When asked why anyone would keep a loaded musket in such a public place, she answered, “My ancestor who build this house loaded it one night in front of his family and hung it there, telling everyone, ‘This gun will fire the first shot for the Colonies’ independence.’”

“Too bad he died before 1776,” the tourist said.

“Oh, no,” the woman replied. “He lived into the 1800s.”

“Then why didn’t he fire the gun?”

“Well,” she smiled, “he just never thought George Washington’s little skirmishes with the British would ever amount to anything.”

The man obviously lived through the event he was anticipating, and never noticed it was happening!

By narrating Jesus’ transfiguration, our evangelists are assuring us that Jesus’ first followers didn’t fall into that near-sighted colonist’s trap. They knew who Jesus of Nazareth really was, and what he was doing.

At the beginning of the first Christian century, Jews had been waiting for more than 800 years for a Messiah: a unique person anointed by Yahweh to free them from their “problems” and inaugurate an ideal age. They had originally believed their king would be that person. But after a bunch of royal rotten eggs, they began to look elsewhere. Contrary to popular belief, there was no one scriptural concept of Messiah. Each age had different problems, requiring different Messiahs to take care of them.

The author of Daniel, for instance, writes in the midst of a 2nd century, BCE, Greek persecution. His people are being horribly oppressed - to the point of martyrdom - for their faith in Yahweh. Like all later “apocalyptic” writers, Daniel falls back on God to rescue them from their persecution. Only God can send someone “like a son of man” to stop the oppression. Though this term originally referred to all humans who, with Yahweh’s help, would eventually overcome the Greek menace, Jesus, in today’s gospel pericope seems to apply it specifically to himself.

Scholars believe this well-known transfiguration passage is a classic biblical “myth:” a portrayal of something which, though true, can only be expressed in symbolic language. In this case, it’s an insight into the person of Jesus. For his disciples, he’s more than meets the eye.

Jesus has become the light of their lives. Not only does he fulfill their dreams of Yahweh’s presence in their lives – something the feast of tents (or tabernacles) commemorates – he has a relationship with God like no other human; he’s actually God’s son! He embodies everything the Law and the prophets (Moses and Elijah) convey.

But of course, as I mentioned above, this biblical myth represents an insight. It’s there, and then it’s gone. It just lasts a few seconds. Only after Jesus’ followers eventually experience his resurrection will their conviction about these things become permanent, essential elements of their faith.

In a way, it’s a shame the author of II Peter took this transfiguration passage literally. It’s important that we fall back on our faith insights. Though looking up we, like his disciples, see only Jesus, if we don’t remember what we “saw” before we looked up, we’re liable to still have a loaded musket somewhere around.

AUGUST 13TH, 2017: NINEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

Today's three readings are quite disturbing. They surface things many of us would rather keep under a theological lock and key. Perhaps some of the stuff we learned in catechism class "ain't necessarily so."

The "thing" in our first reading occurs immediately after today's liturgical passage. It's consoling to us believers to know that Yahweh speaks to Elijah not in wind, an earthquake, and fire, but in "a tiny whispering breeze." Couldn't be a more pleasant encounter. Yet what God asks the prophet in this specific situation is more than unsettling. He/she demands to know, "What are you doing here?"

Elijah is running away from Jezebel, the Israelite Queen who's put a contract out on his life. Thankfully, Yahweh helped him escape to Mount Horeb (Sinai) by providing him with sufficient food and water to trek 40 days and 40 nights through the wilderness. But now God abruptly informs him he shouldn't be there. He insists the prophet return to Israel and forcibly confront this idolatrous queen. After giving him the means to get to Horeb, Yahweh insists he's in the wrong place!

Did something parallel ever happen to you? Is it possible for God to change God's mind?

We know from today's Romans pericope that something parallel did happen to Paul of Tarsus. He's spent a lifetime trying to be as good a Jew as he could possibly be, adhering to all the Mosaic 613 laws. Yet through his experience of the risen Jesus, he's discovered God wants him to go beyond those regulations and become another Christ. Justification – doing what God wants you to do - has taken on a completely new meaning for this Apostle to the Gentiles.

Yet Paul claims he would be willing to give up all those saving insights and be "cut off from Christ" if only his fellow Jews would embrace this unexpected path to justification. With countless acts of anti-Semitism in our not too distant Christian past, it's difficult for us to appreciate Paul's frame of mind. That's simply not how a lot of us were "brought up." To say our faith springs from and revolves around Judaism is an understatement. But it's something few of us have ever been encouraged to explore.

Neither have we Catholics been encouraged to explore Peter's sinking in today's gospel pericope. Accustomed to applying just one biblical verse to the leader of the Twelve – Matthew 16:18: "You're the rock and on this rock I'm going to build my church!" – we conveniently forget the other things said to Peter in the Christian Scriptures. Things like, "Get behind me, Satan!" or today's statement, "O you of little faith."

Our evangelists had no idea this poor, probably illiterate fisherman would one day morph into the first Roman Catholic infallible pope. As I mentioned above, he functions as the gospel leader of the Twelve. But no one originally thought of that group as the church's first bishops. They were simply a classic symbol of the historical Jesus' plan to offer his reform to all of Israel's twelve tribes. For this Galilean carpenter, the tribe of Naphtali was just as important as the tribe of Judah. And he demonstrated that conviction by traveling around with the Twelve: a group meant to bring back memories of the twelve sons of Jacob.

Matthew believes anyone – even Peter – can eventually stop focusing on Jesus and make other things a priority. When that happens, the person begins to sink, overwhelmed by those other things.

It's interesting today that we once again have a pope – Francis - who personally focuses on Jesus, and challenges us to do the same. No wonder he faces opposition. We're a little out of practice. Many of us simply haven't done that for a while.

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