

APRIL 1st, 2018: EASTER VIGIL

Exodus 14:15-15:1 Isaiah 55:1-11 Romans 6:3-11 Mark 16:1-7

Ideally all 9 readings should be proclaimed tonight, but because of space limits I can only comment on 4.

Tonight we're reflecting more on our own death and resurrection than we're reflecting on the historical Jesus' death and resurrection. If we haven't personally died and risen, there's no reason to celebrate Easter. These readings only make sense when we listen to them through the filter of our own experiences.

The entire celebration revolves around Paul's reminder to the Romans, ". . . We who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. . . . If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him."

When Paul originally wrote these words, he didn't envision baptism as just pouring a few drops of water over someone's forehead. Baptism in his day was administered by immersion. Catechumens were totally dunked under the water, then raised up; an outward sign of dying, being buried, and rising with Jesus. As with all sacraments, what happens outside symbolizes what's happening inside.

The key is that, like Jesus, one must really be dead before one can rise. As John's Jesus states in chapter 12, "Only when the grain of wheat dies will it produce fruit." That's why these specific women are at the tomb. In Mark's gospel they alone actually saw Jesus die. Had they not initially experienced his death they wouldn't have been the first to experience his resurrection.

They'll eventually understand they're not dealing with a resuscitation. The historical Jesus doesn't simply start breathing again. When Paul experienced the "Christ" on the Damascus road, he experienced a whole "new creation," no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. As he later told his community in Galatia, he'd never before experienced anyone quite like him/her.

The essential thing about Jesus' followers is that those who, like him, die by giving themselves to those around them also rise into new creations. That's why, as we learned in catechism class, no one should confess sins they've committed before baptism. It isn't just that baptism washed away those sins; a different person committed those sins, a person who died.

Just as the ancient Israelites became a new people by crossing through the sea during the Exodus, so we became a new people when we were submerged in the waters of baptism. A group of runaway slaves became the Chosen People when they stepped into the sea; we became other Christs when we stepped into our baptismal water.

Our newness is something on which we can constantly reflect. We never run out of possibilities, never have a shortage of ideas. We're always acquiring new insights. That's why Isaiah 55 is a unique reading for this unique night. Deutero-Isaiah's disciples deliberately chose to end their 16 chapter collection of his oracles in this way; mentioning experiences on which, 500 years after their mentor's death, even other Christs can reflect.

We who've imitated Jesus' death and resurrection know what it's like to actually have a deep thirst quenched, a thirst many of us didn't even notice until this Galilean carpenter became part of our lives. Because of his/her presence, we daily experience someone who simultaneously is so near to us that we can't imagine how we existed before, yet who is also as far away from us as the heavens are above the earth. Part of our dying/rising is a commitment to live our lives in the midst of such contradictions.

We have no choice but to constantly fall back on God's word in our life. Deutero-Isaiah was convinced that as soon as Yahweh says something, it happens. This night of all nights is the best occasion to surface what the risen Jesus is saying in my life. If we don't know, we simply haven't been listening.

APRIL 8th, 2018: SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 2:32-35 I John 5:1-6 John 20:19-31

Looking back at my pre-scriptural religious education, it seems the only “vision” instilled in me was my being in heaven one day. If I daydreamed about anything having to do with this earth it probably revolved around all my friends and family converting to Catholicism so we could spend eternity together. I certainly didn’t share the vision of the gospel Jesus.

That’s why many of the Easter season Acts readings are so important. Scholars agree the glimpses of the early Jerusalem Christian community which Luke provides most probably aren’t accurate historical photographs of that church, a community in which “there was no needy person among them.” Luke seems simply to be depicting an ideal community, one in which Christians are living as Jesus expects them to live. He’s sharing Jesus’ vision with his readers, encouraging them to spend their lives trying to make that vision a reality. Unlike my early religious education, it had little to do with getting into heaven. It was much more about creating a little bit of heaven here on earth.

In this passage, the death entailed in creating that heaven revolves around giving up personal ownership of property. It’s clear from the following Ananias and Sapphira narrative that no one was obligated to take such a drastic step in order to become a Christian. Yet, if we’re other Christs, the possibility of such an action should always be in the back of our minds.

Of course, the reason for such an extraordinary move should always be in the front of our minds: love. The unknown author of I John clearly understands its positioning. Love is always central for all Jesus’ followers. “We know that we love the children of God,” he writes, “when we love God and obey his commandments.” Our faith can only “conquer the world” by falling back on the power of love.

Yet for most of us, even more drastic than giving up property is giving up revenge; something John’s Jesus expects all of us to do all of the time. That’s one of the reasons he gives us his Spirit, to help us forgive others.

We Catholics have been so accustomed to hearing Jesus’ words about “forgiving” and “retaining” as the proof text for the church’s power to “hear confessions,” that we forget he never wanted anyone to retain someone’s sins. He simply seems to be pointing out the consequences of such behavior. In case we haven’t noticed, when we forgive a person, that person’s sins are actually forgiven. When we go against his teachings and retain a person’s sins, those sins remain part of who that person is. We then not only have to worry about our sins, we also have to worry about his or her sins. Unforgiven, they become part of our sinfulness.

I frequently remind my students that Scripture provides us with two separate occasions for the Spirit’s arrival: Pentecost morning in Acts and Easter Sunday night in John. I also point out that the Acts narrative is accompanied by several “disturbing” phenomena: noise, wind and fire, reminding us that the Spirit always disturbs our otherwise tranquil life. The same is true of John’s narrative. Fulfilling Jesus’ vision of a forgiving community can be just as disturbing as noise, wind and fire. It’s at right angles to many of our personalities.

No wonder Thomas wants to see and touch the risen Jesus’ wounds as proof he/she actually exists. It’s really Jesus only if this “new creation” can show the scars resulting from living out his vision.

I trust one day that same Jesus will check on our scars when we finally encounter him at the pearly gates. If we haven’t shared his wounds, I presume neither did we share his vision.

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