

NOVEMBER 18TH, 2018: THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Daniel 12:1-3 Hebrews 10:11-14, 18 Mark 13:24-32

Scholars remind us that one of the three basic changes in early Christianity was the switch from a short-term faith to a long-term faith. For one reason or another, Jesus' earliest followers believed he would triumphantly return in a short period of time. Everyone would recognize his presence and those who imitated his dying and rising would share in his glory. We need only glance at chapter four of the earliest Christian writing we possess – I Thessalonians – to read a brief description of Jesus' "Parousia." According to Paul, Christ's return will happen so soon that those unfortunate individuals who died before that glorious event will simply have to "tread water" in their graves until he comes back. The Apostle presumes he'll still be alive when he returns.

But by the mid-80s, reality sets in. When Luke writes his gospel and Acts – more than 20 years after Paul's martyrdom - he takes for granted he and his readers will live their whole natural lives and physically die before the Parousia. Either Christianity begins to plan for the long haul, or it becomes extinct. Jesus' disciples have no choice but to be other Christs "for the duration."

Mark writes at least 10 or 15 years before Luke. He's still waiting for the Parousia when he composes today's gospel pericope. Though he can click off all the preliminaries to the event, his Jesus still claims he doesn't know its exact date. He simply states he'll be around for it, and no matter what happens, his teachings will still be valid – forever. People just have to hang in there.

These first- and second-generation Christians often fell back on "apocalyptic" literature to help understand their situation. The authors of that particular genre – usually suffering persecution – constantly zeroed in on Yahweh's guarantee to deliver them from their cruel treatment. That's certainly what we find in today's Daniel passage. With the help of Michael, Yahweh's angelic champion, the faithful will not only be able to endure this terrific "distress," they'll actually conquer the evil that's beating them down. If they keep the faith they'll eventually "be like the stars forever."

The Hebrew's author doesn't seem to be worried about a delayed Parousia, nor a persecution. He simply seems content to just reflect on the significance of having the risen Jesus in our midst. Employing an image foreign to Gentile Christians – the Jewish priesthood – he endeavors to point out that the historical Jesus did more than just imitate their ministry. What these functionaries accomplished daily for a limited group of people, Jesus accomplished once for everyone. Technically we no longer need to be forgiven. Jesus has already taken care of that. Our role is to just accept that forgiveness and offer it to others.

Reflecting on the crisis facing our church today, I presume we're also going to have to experience some basic changes. If we don't, like the first century church, we'll also be in danger of becoming extinct. We can never forget, as our sacred authors insisted, that the risen Jesus is among us, even if he isn't helping us in the ways we once took for granted he would. Like the earliest Christians, it's up to us to change our ideas of his presence. If, as Pope Francis believes, clericalism is stopping us from carrying on Jesus' ministry, we simply have to adapt, just as the gospel authors had to adapt to his delayed Parousia. Without a new image of church, Jesus' words will never get through as he intended. I presume those words are immortal; but the way we proclaim them isn't. Though we're rarely called to be as courageous as our faith ancestors, this might be one of those times.

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NOVEMBER 25th, 2018: CHRIST THE KING

Daniel 7:13-14 Revelation 1:5-8 John 18:33b-37

Today's feast always creates problems. One word is at the root of the problem: king. What does it mean? How is it applied to Jesus? What's been made of it through the centuries? If Christians are to imitate Jesus of Nazareth, are we expected to make part of his regal personality our own?

Given the gospel Jesus' reflections on his ministry, "kingly" would be the last adjective anyone would employ to describe it. Though many of his followers believed he was the Messiah they and their fellow Jews had been expecting for centuries, he frequently not only rejected that title, but on those rare occasions when he applied it to himself, he always defined the word at right angles to the way First Century CE Jews defined it. On Palm Sunday, for instance, instead of triumphantly riding into Jerusalem on horseback – the military Messiah Jews anticipated – he rides into the Holy City astride a donkey. The crowd would have done a double take. He isn't the messianic savior for whom they're waiting.

Jesus always insists on giving new definitions to traditional words, especially when it comes to his unique concept of leadership.

The author of today's Daniel reading clearly describes the Messiah the vast majority of Jews were expecting during Jesus' historical ministry. According to their apocalyptic theology, when he eventually makes his presence known, Yahweh will give him "dominion, glory and kingship; all peoples, nations, and languages (will) serve him." A complete turnabout from the gospel Jesus' determination to spend his life in service to others. No wonder most Jews saw only a Capernaum carpenter when they looked at him.

Though the author of Revelation regards the risen Jesus as "the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth," he seems to be falling back on the importance this new creation has in his life. He appears to be much more poetic than realistic. The Christ certainly is the dead's firstborn, but I don't think the writer expected his readers to take his claim of Jesus being the ruler of the earth's kings literally, especially when we hear what the gospel Jesus says about the issue.

Our gospel pericope from John is just one among several in which Jesus tells us not to celebrate today's feast. Or, if we insist on celebrating it, to be careful how we do so.

The important thing to remember is that in every gospel passage in which Pilate asks Jesus about his kingship, he basically responds, "No! I'm not!" Had the Roman prefect taken Jesus' response as a "Yes!" he would have had him crucified on the spot. This upstart preacher would have been making himself a rival to Tiberius the Roman emperor – high treason.

In today's passage, John's Jesus is basically saying, "If you insist on calling me a king, you have to give a brand-new definition to the title. I'm here to tell people about truths only God can reveal to them; not the kind of work in which kings normally engage."

Jesus couldn't be clearer: "For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." He obviously expects those who carry on his ministry after his death and resurrection to also be proclaimers of the truth.

Perhaps the question we face today doesn't revolve around telling the truth about who Jesus is, but telling the truth about who (or what) the church is. The sexual abuse scandal we're experiencing is rooted in giving a royal definition to the church, something the gospel Jesus rejects. If we don't define our terms as Jesus defines them, we're certainly going to have problems.