

JUNE 30TH, 2019: THIRTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
I Kings 19:16b, 19-21 Galatians 51, 13-18 Luke 9:51-62

We often forget the problems in the biblical communities which originally triggered our sacred writings. We'd have no Scripture without them. Our inspired authors never write in a vacuum. Something's always going on when they take stylus to papyrus, something that bugs them.

Today's three readings, for example, provide us with one of their classic issues: someone's reversal of faith.

Paul's letter to the Galatians revolves around that unforeseen development. He had personally evangelized the community in Galatia, assuring them that sharing the faith of Jesus would eventually bring the life they desired. Their only obligation was to die and rise with the risen Jesus in their midst. Though some in the church were Jews, the Apostle said nothing about Moses' 613 laws. Jewish Christians were still expected to maintain those regulations because of the agreement all Israelites had made with Yahweh; but it was their dying and rising with the Christ, not their covenant obligations, which brought life.

Yet some of Paul's Galatian converts eventually reversed field, having discovered it was far easier to keep the Mosaic laws than to die and rise with Jesus. Though their faithfulness to those Sinai regulations was difficult, faithfulness to the risen Jesus was far more complicated, far more pervasive. Their new commitment demanded that one had to be on one's toes constantly, always alert to giving himself or herself to those around them. Though now experiencing a freedom they couldn't have imagined before this Galilean carpenter came into their lives, it was a costly endeavor. Some eventually preferred the slavery of the Jewish law to the freedom of dying and rising with Jesus. Given the cost, they made their choice.

It's clear from our Lucan pericope that Paul's Galatians weren't alone. Some perspective converts wouldn't even go far enough to make a commitment. Rejected by Samaritans because they were traveling to Jerusalem, James and John prefer heavenly fire to free choice, totally counter to the message Jesus preached. Yet it seems the reversals which the evangelist's community have already experienced shape how the gospel Jesus presents his message.

He pulls no punches. "Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head." Nor is there an appropriate time to make that life-changing decision. Waiting until those disturbed by such a choice - like parents - have passed from the scene isn't an option. When God makes this unexpected offer, it's take it or leave it. And once you take it, there's no looking back, not even for formal goodbyes.

Though Elijah grants Elisha one last merciful glance back to his mother and father, even he eventually slaughters his oxen - his livelihood - and follows the prophet down the road as his attendant. He even burns his plow; he has nothing left.

I've often quoted Jack Shea's insightful remark about the gospel Jesus of Nazareth. According to this spiritual writer, our itinerant preacher simply answered three direct questions for his audience: what do you want out of life, where do you get it, how much does it cost?

It's clear from our sacred writings that the third answer creates most of the problems for the community and helps trigger a good portion of our Scriptures. Followers of the risen Jesus didn't simply make up their minds, carry on his/her ministry, and live happily ever after. Many did a lot of looking back over their shoulders; some even changed the direction in which they were traveling.

Our Christian writers never downplay the difficulty. But neither do they downplay the life that comes from working through that difficulty. It all depends on what we want from the life we live; the life God offers us.

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JULY 7TH, 2019: FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Isaiah 66:10-14c Galatians 6:14-18 Luke 10:1-12, 17-20

I presume Paul would have benefited from a class or two in anger control before he wrote his letter to the Galatians. It's an understatement to say he was uptight when he dictated it. He had personally evangelized the Galatian community, teaching them how to become other Christs by imitating Jesus' death and resurrection in their own lives. Only by giving themselves for others would they be transformed into the same new creation into which the risen Jesus had been transformed.

Yet in a short period of time, some of them - as former Jews - had reverted back to their old practice of finding salvation in keeping the 613 laws of Moses, symbolized by the men being circumcised. They found more security in that than in being crucified with Jesus. Paul was so infuriated by their behavior that a chapter before today's pericope, he angrily writes, "Would that those who are upsetting you might also castrate themselves!" (Somehow the church has never found a liturgical setting for this particular passage.)

Using himself as an example, the Apostle encourages people just to look at him and see the damage to his body that his dying with Jesus has brought about. (Scholars believe his "marks of Jesus" have nothing to do with the later phenomenon of individuals receiving the "stigmata.") Paul's been scourged and beaten because of his imitation of Jesus, not because of his keeping the Mosaic regulations. Though he's endured great physical pain, he's convinced there's also a huge amount of psychological pain in discipleship. That seems to be what he means when he speaks about "the world being crucified" to him.

That's precisely the kind of pain Third Isaiah is presuming when he talks about "rejoicing with Jerusalem." Among other things, the prophet is trying to stimulate his community to simply leave Babylon and return to the Jewish capital. The problem is that when he's preaching these words, Jerusalem is in ruins, wiped off the face of the earth by the Babylonians over 60 or 70 years before. These formerly exiled Israelites not only have to return, they also have to rebuild. After one glance at the destroyed city, most decided to go back to Babylon. They found more peace and security in a foreign land than in rebuilding their native land.

Obviously we must go beyond the here and now and have a vision of what can be if we're true disciples. Living by such a vision entails a real psychological death; something not only many Israelites, but also many Galatians were unwilling to endure.

As we hear in today's gospel passage, giving oneself over to the vision of Jesus frequently causes rejection. Luke's Jesus is not just predicting what's going to happen when his followers try to evangelize others, like all gospel writers, Luke is also reflecting on what already happened to some of the "missionaries" in his own community. He wants to make certain they don't get down just because they were often rejected. No matter how their message was received, God is still among us working effectively in our daily lives. God's presence doesn't depend on people recognizing it. Whether proclaimers of Jesus' word succeed or fail, as long as they keep working to make the risen Jesus' vision a reality in this world, their names are "written in heaven." According to Luke's Jesus, that's the only thing that matters.

Obviously a lot of Catholics again accepted Jesus' vision after Vatican II. And a lot of Catholics eventually abandoned that vision for the sake of their own security. Thank goodness we have a pope who's calling us to return to that vision, no matter the cost.

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