

AUGUST 14, 2011: TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Isaiah 56:1,6-7 Romans 11:13-15,29-32 Matthew 15:21-28

Those who believe the historical Jesus tried to create a new religion can't possibly understand today's three readings. Scholars, like the late Raymond Brown, have told us for a long time that Jesus had no intention of founding a church as we know it. He simply thought of himself as a reformer of his own religion - Judaism.

Among other things, that meant Jesus didn't get very involved with Gentiles. That's why today's gospel pericope is significant; it narrates one of those rare occasions in which he's shown relating to a non-Jew.

Though most biblical Jews lived their daily lives without thinking a lot about how they were to interact with Gentiles, the classic prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures did at times treat the subject. In today's Third-Isaiah passage, for instance, Yahweh invites non-Jews to come to ^M . . . my holy mountain and make joyful in my house of prayer." But there are conditions attached. These Gentiles must first ". . . join themselves to Yahweh." That implies they will "keep the Sabbath free from profanation and hold to Yahweh's covenant." In other words, they must become Jews.

The earliest followers of Jesus follow the same path. They welcome non-Jews into their communities - as long as they first convert to Judaism. Why would anyone want to imitate a reformer of Judaism unless he or she were Jewish?

This presupposition is challenged when liberals like Paul of Tarsus come on the scene. Because he zeroes in on the risen Jesus, not the historical Jesus, he sees no reason to demand Gentiles convert to Judaism before they convert to Christianity. After all, as he once reminded the Galatians, the risen Jesus is just as much a slave as a free person, a Gentile as a Jew, and a woman as a man. If the Christ among them isn't restricted to Judaism, why should Christian Gentiles be restricted to that religion?

Yet, as we saw last week, Paul himself still remains a Jew, and is proud of it. Today he reminds the Gentiles in the Christian community in Rome that even his title - "Apostle to the Gentiles" - has a Jewish connection. "I glory in my ministry," he confides, "in order to make my race jealous and thus save some of them."

Paul personally executes a 180 degree shift in the early Christian "plan" to convert all Jews first, then turn to Gentiles. Since most Jews are rejecting Jesus, his plan is to direct his efforts to converting Gentiles, hoping his fellow Jews will notice the benefits these non-Jews receive from living the faith, and, out of jealousy, flock to Christianity.

Of course, the Apostle is basing his argument on the strong faith of his Gentile converts. Their willingness to integrate Jesus' dying and rising into their daily lives is essential to his plan. In some sense, non-Jews should be better at doing this because they're not distracted by the laws and traditions which so frequently stop the Chosen People from taking that life-changing leap of faith.

Even Matthew stresses this Gentile faith dimension when he narrates Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite mother pleading for her daughter's cure. Jesus' initial response is amazing. He basically calls her a dog. Only after she takes his metaphor and throws it back at him does he grant her request. But, remembering what I said above about Gentile faith, it's important to note that Matthew significantly alters the story he found in Mark. Mark's Jesus simply praises the mother's sharp mind; Matthew's Jesus, on the other hand, says, "Woman, great is your faith!" Faith and Gentiles are gradually becoming inseparable.

Of course, following Paul's argument, if there are still non-Christian Jews in the world today, it's not their fault. Their lack of conversion can only be caused by our lack of faith.

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AUGUST 21, 2011: TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 22:19-23 Romans 11:33-36 Matthew 16:13-20

When teaching today's gospel passage I often mention that a real devotee of classical music is someone who can listen to the William Tell Overture and not think of the Lone Ranger. In a parallel way, a real student of Scripture is someone who can listen to Matthew 16:18 - "You are Rock, and upon this rock I will build my church." - and not think of the papacy.

I'll leave it to church historians to explain how an original equalitarian community based on loving service to one another developed into the hierarchical structure of clergy and laity with which we're familiar today. Just as Rossini knew nothing of a masked man and his faithful Indian companion, so Matthew knew nothing of an all-controlling Vatican bureaucracy.

Since Matthew seems to believe Jesus' Second Coming will take place in his lifetime, why would he be providing us with proof-texts for a form of church government that will last through the centuries? Like all evangelists, he's concerned with the problems and difficulties his community is facing at the time he's writing. None of our sacred authors write for us. If they did, they'd be writing in English!

We know from Chapter 23 that leadership in Matthew's community was starting to take on some of the worst aspects of Jewish leadership with which it's Jewish/Christian members were familiar. As director of our diocese's permanent diaconate program back in the 70s and 80s, I experienced something similar. Those were the beginning days of diaconal ministry. When most of our candidates envisioned their future service, they envisioned priesthood, the only Catholic ministry with which they were familiar. I often had to remind them that they were preparing for a unique ministry, something our church had not seen for almost 1,500 years. They had to create a new image of ministry and not just prepare to be "mini-priests."

In a similar way, Matthew's community knew only Jewish models of religious leadership. That meant, among other things, that he had to impress upon them that they were not just replacing Jewish leaders with Christian leaders, but that the model of leadership itself had changed. It wasn't a matter, for instance, of exchanging Eliakim for Shebna, as we hear in today's Isaiah reading. In that case, the former simply took over the office of the latter. In Matthew's situation, the whole concept of the office had changed.

Though the Christian community's leaders could still bind and loose like the old Jewish experts in Mosaic law bond and loosed in interpreting the 613 Torah regulations, now they were working from Jesus' insights and attitudes about law. (In two weeks, for instance, we'll see that the whole Christian community was expected to take part in this process of binding and loosing.)

The foundation (the "rock") of this unique community revolved around the belief that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Without that conviction permeating everything we do, there's no Christian community, no matter how perfect its structure. The beauty of today's passage is that Matthew sees this faith in Simon, one of the most fallible of Jesus' disciples; someone who next week Jesus will call "Satan," and, when push comes to shove, a person who will deny he even knows him. Except for his eventual, dogged belief in the risen Jesus, no one would ever surface recognizable leadership qualities in Simon.

As usual, Paul hits the biblical nail on the head when he reminds the church in Rome that the first task of our Christian leaders is to constantly help us attain "the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge (experience) of God." To God and Jesus" be the glory," not to the leader.

Our 2,000 years of being church have demonstrated how hard it is for Christian leaders to pull that off.

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