

DECEMBER 5, 2010: SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 11:1-10 Romans 15:4-9 Matthew 3:1-12

It's one thing to expect a single charismatic individual to come along and usher in an ideal age. It's another thing for each of us to do what's necessary to help create that ideal age.

No one can argue with First-Isaiah's depiction of the perfect Davidic leader. Active during a period when the Chosen People are continually threatened by their arch-enemy, the Assyrians, this century BCE prophet tries to project them into a day and age when total peace reigns. Everyone will live so harmoniously that "... the wolf will be the guest of the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the kid . . . There will be no harm or ruin on all my (Yahweh's) holy mountain; for the earth will be filled with knowledge of Yahweh as water covers the sea." We, like the prophet's audience, can only hope this "sprout from the stump of Jesse" will hit town in our lifetime.

Though both Paul and Matthew also paint a picture of an ideal world, they're convinced the special person destined to usher in that longed-for era isn't going to bring it about alone. It'll only come when we have the courage to live our lives as Jesus of Nazareth lived his.

Matthew's John the Baptist, for instance, tells his followers that the Messiah they're expecting to transform this world will actually be concerned with judging their attempts to change this world. "He it is who will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor, and gather his grain into the barn, but the chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire." In other words, Jesus' ideal world will be a "do-it-yourself" project. Yet, we imitators of Jesus aren't expected to go it alone. The Baptist assures us that Jesus' Spirit will always play an essential role in even the smallest spark his followers ignite.

This seems to be why Paul is so confident the Christian community in Rome can "... live in perfect harmony with one another according to the spirit of Christ Jesus... ." "We can't have peace without creating the unity which brings peace about.

In the very next verse, the Apostle provides us with the key to achieve such harmony: "Accept one another.. as Christ accepted you, for the glory of God." The earliest Christians had to bridge a huge cultural gap in order to actually "accept one another:" the centuries-old gulf between Jews and Gentiles. The former, Paul states, are saved through Jesus because of Yahweh's ancient promises; the latter, because of Yahweh's mercy. Yet in order to be authentic imitators of Jesus, each must accept the other as equal.

With all of today's scriptural expertise, I'm amazed those preparing for confirmation are still being taught just the seven gifts of the Spirit found in today's first reading - gifts which the ideal Jewish king is expected to possess: wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge and fear of the Lord (with "piety" added to round out a perfect seven). Teachers usually tiptoe around the Christian gifts of the Spirit which Paul clicks off in I Corinthians 12 - gifts which can lead to huge divisions if they're put into play in an institution-oriented church. Yet Paul believes such "divisive" gifts as prophecy, healing, administration and tongues can actually bring about an ideal world if we "other Christs" are willing to fall back on the Spirit's power to unite those who unselfishly exercise such charismas.

One ideal person won't be able to pull off such a feat by himself or herself. It'll take all those who share Jesus' vision to accomplish it. But how many of us are willing to die enough to ourselves to unite these diverse gifts into the powerful unity Jesus envisions?

Roger Vermalen Karban

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FOSIL, BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

DECEMBER 12, 2010: THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 35:1-6, 10 James 5:7-10 Matthew 11:2-11

Our sacred authors presume no one can live his or her faith alone. Believers need other believers to support and encourage them to live that faith.

During a recent class on Amos, one of my students asked a very pertinent question. Presuming this 8th century BCE shepherd/prophet was illiterate, she wanted to know how he could have written the nine chapters of oracles contained in “his” book. The answer is rather simple, but its implications are far-reaching.

As far as we can tell, biblical prophets never actually wrote any of the prophecies we attribute to them. They delivered them orally, not in written form. The prophets’ disciples were the ones who eventually put their mentors’ words into the format we have today. That means no matter how rejected and alone these men and women were, they still could count on a small handful of friends who not only supported them, but also made certain their words would be appreciated by future generations.

All the writings contained in our Hebrew and Christian Scriptures eventually became a support to others of faith, assuring them they were not alone in their following of Yahweh and Jesus.

We hear the consequences of trying to live one’s faith alone in today’s gospel. “John in prison heard about the works Christ performed and sent a message through his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you “He who is to come” or do we look for another?’” The isolation of prison starts Matthew’s John the Baptist on the road to doubting his own mission of faith.

Though Jesus assures John’s disciples about his own ministry, we’re still haunted by the fact that even someone as committed as the Baptizer could find Jesus a “stumbling block.” Being alone over a long period of time can easily lead someone to develop a devastating mind-set.

That’s why Isaiah’s words are so important today. “Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak, say to those that are frightened; ‘Be strong, fear not! Here is your God’” No matter how firmly we’re convinced that one day “the eyes of the blind (will) be opened, the ears of the deaf (will) be cleared, the lame (will) leap like a stag (and) the tongues of the dumb will sing,” it’s easy to take our eyes off the prize when we think no one else shares our vision.

We know from our gospels that the thrust of Jesus’ preaching revolves around his belief that “the reign of God is close at hand:” that God is working effectively in our lives right here and now. How long do you think we could keep such faith at the center of our lives if we were the only one on earth who had such a conviction?

Even James pleads for patience from his readers. He believes only those who “hang in there” will bring about the kind of world their faith envisions. Considering what I mentioned above, it’s interesting which models of persistence he offers: “Take the prophets who spoke in the name of Yahweh.” Of course, Scripture scholars tell us even the classic Jewish prophets needed to be supported in their faith.

Today of all days, it’s important we fall back on the context in which we’re hearing these three readings proclaimed: the Eucharist. As liturgical composer Grayson Warren Brown pointed out during last summer’s Chicago Celebration Conference, “The church and its liturgy became necessary not to get us to heaven, but to get us through life.” It’s in the Eucharist that our ancestors in the faith were most encouraged to make their faith part of their everyday lives. As we listen to these readings today, look around. Our fellow-believers are part of the force keeping us believing. We’re not alone.

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