

OCTOBER 14, 2012: TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 7:7-11 Hebrews 4:12-13 Mark 10:17-30

Those who claim Jesus of Nazareth primarily came on earth to get us into heaven must deal with today's gospel pericope.

The man asks Jesus a simple question: "What do I have to do to get into heaven?"

Jesus responds just as simply: "Keep the commandments."

When he answers, "All these I've observed from my youth," Jesus could only have said, "Don't worry! You're going to go to heaven." He seems to have presumed good Jews were already getting into heaven without his help. But it's clear Jesus wanted to take his followers beyond this bare minimum of just getting into heaven. His ministry revolved around helping people experience the "kingdom of God" long before their physical death; making them aware of God working effectively in their everyday lives, the one experience the young man lacks. We can keep all the laws, get into heaven, but never experience God here and now.

Why would anyone reject a call to step up into such a fulfilling, fascinating level of life?

Already in chapter 1, in his first public proclamation, Jesus spoke of the repentance necessary to experience God's kingdom: a complete change in one's value system. Throughout his ministry his goal is to help his followers focus on people and things they had barely noticed before he came into their lives. It's this "metanoia" - this complete reshaping of one's life - that this man rejects. He simply can't make people more important than his wealth.

When the disciples respond to Jesus' "snowball in hell" example by asking, "Then who can be saved?" they're not referring to getting into heaven - Jesus already assured the man that he was on the road to eternal salvation - they're referring to being saved right here and now by entering God's present kingdom. Thankfully Jesus assures them that God can make the impossible, possible. God can help anyone "go against type" and focus on the things and people on which God focuses.

The Wisdom author is certainly on the same path as Jesus. By "wisdom" he means an ability to find patterns in the way God works in the world. Nothing, not wealth, health, or good looks, should stop his readers from engaging in such a quest. "All good things together came to me in her company, and countless riches at her hands." Poverty with wisdom is much more rewarding than wealth without wisdom.

But no one sums up Jesus' teaching better than the author of the letter of James in today's pericope. The historical Jesus, like the historical Deutero-Isaiah, based his whole ministry on God's word. He had no power, no authority. He simply delivered God's word. People either accepted or rejected it. Yet, as our writer discovered, that word is "... living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart." No matter how you grab that word, it cuts - for better or for worse.

Spiritual author Jack Shea perfectly summed up the historical Jesus' ministry. The Galilean carpenter simply answered three questions. What do you want out of life? Where do you get it? How much does it cost?

If you want to experience God working in your everyday life, he'll tell you on what and whom to focus. But, of course that Jesus-focus will demand a complete change in your life's orientation. No wonder Robert North, the famous biblical archaeologist is so adamant that Jesus never expected his followers to be more than a small minority in the community. Everyone wants to get into heaven. But only a few are willing to pay the price of beginning that heaven before they actually enter the pearly gates.

OCTOBER 21, 2012: TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 53:10-11 Hebrews 4:14-16 Mark 10:35-45

Today we hear Mark's third, most painful way in which we're to die with Jesus.

Following the three-fold pattern of prediction-misunderstanding-clarification which he introduced in chapters 8 and 9, the evangelist begins his narrative with Jesus' foretelling the passion, death and resurrection he'll soon experience in Jerusalem. (Just one problem: those who created our liturgical reading omitted Jesus' prediction! If you're reading the gospel today, please include it. One day, Mark will personally thank you.)

James and John immediately step up and make fools of themselves, asking for the "glory seats," - a complete misunderstanding of what Jesus had just said about dying. The brothers are asking for a "Plan B," a way of being another Christ without enduring the suffering and death of the first Christ. After telling them they're not smart enough to even know what question to ask, Jesus clarifies in what his cup and baptism consist.

"You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

When I ask my students about the money value of a ransom, they logically answer, "There is none. The more important the person, the higher the ransom." When Jesus says he regards his life as a "ransom," he's saying he's only as valuable as the many he's ransoming are valuable. His worth comes from their worth.

Reaching this frame of mind about one's life is Mark's third way of dying with Jesus. Nothing causes more pain and death than constantly trying to be the servant (or slave!) of others. Nothing could be more counter to James and John's plan to one day sit on their glory seats and lord it over others. Jesus demands we be counterculture in the most intimate areas of our lives: how we relate with and to others. How many of us would rather follow the misunderstanding than be committed to the clarification?

The author of our Hebrews passage thinks it essential to the salvation Jesus offers that he not lord it over us, but becomes one with us. "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin." Jesus values us enough to suffer the same human pain all of us are expected to endure. He doesn't look at us and the world from the outside in, but from the inside out.

Five hundred years before Jesus' birth, the disciples of Deutero-Isaiah, without our concept of an after-life, were forced to explain why such a good man had suffered such a horrible death. Today's pericope from the Fourth Song of the Suffering Servant shows they eventually reached the conclusion that the prophet's becoming one with all of them during his ministry had eventually forced him to accept their own sinful weakness and suffering. By dying he saved them from death. ". . . Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear."

Those who contend that the historical Jesus planned to set up the glory-seated hierarchical structure of our church certainly have an obligation to explain the process by which James and John's misunderstanding became the norm and Jesus' clarification was discarded.

Wouldn't it be great if each of our churches prominently displayed a banner reading, "It shall not be so among you?"

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