

NOVEMBER 11, 2012: THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

I Kings 17:10-16 Hebrews 9:24-28 Mark 12:38-44

Today's gospel passage is one of the most misunderstood in all of Scripture.

Rarely does a Christian institution embark on a fund raising project without someone in charge bringing up the widow who "from her poverty, contributed all she had, her whole livelihood" to the Jerusalem temple treasury, usually with the comment, "That's what Jesus expects us to do."

Is it?

Not when you put it back in the context in which Mark gives it to us. Jesus has just finished condemning the Jewish religious leaders ". . . who like to go around in long robes and accept greetings in the marketplaces, seats of honor in synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers." In other words, "If you give me your money, I'll 'say one' for you."

Mark's Jesus then immediately gives us "exhibit A:" an example of the latter sin. "He sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasure. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents."

Notice that, unlike many Christian preachers, at no point in the pericope does Jesus ever praise the widow for contributing "all she had." He simply employs her action as one proof of religious leaders "devouring the houses of widows." Instead of taking care of such impoverished people, these money motivated individuals have successfully brainwashed the poor into believing it's their obligation to take care of them.

Anyone familiar with the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures knows Jesus stands shoulder to shoulder with his prophetic predecessors on this issue. One of the most biting condemnations of such practices is in Hosea 4, where Yahweh, referring to the priests receiving "a cut" of all the offerings made at the local shrines, states the obvious: "They feed on the sins of my people." If the priests don't hammer away at the sinfulness of their worshipers, they're not going to offer any sin sacrifices, forcing priests to tighten their belts. (Through the years, some Catholic commentators have actually brought up this passage when dealing with our practice of preaching about the "poor souls in purgatory," and our custom - even obligation - of giving priests stipends to "say a Mass" for them.)

Elijah, in our I Kings reading, demonstrates this prophetic option for the poor in his treatment of the Gentile widow of Zarephath. Though he asks her to provide him with "a bit of bread," he also makes certain "... her jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry" Unlike the Jerusalem priests, Yahweh will not put her and her son in peril because of her generosity to a prophet.

Our first and third readings might lead us to look at our Hebrews passage from a different perspective. The author here is making his well-known comparison between Jewish priests and Jesus as priest. Both are engaged in taking away "sin," but, according to the writer's opinion, Jesus does it infinitely better. But after hearing Jesus' condemnation of the financial abuse of the poor by religious institutions, we've got something to add to our examination of conscience. Jesus' definition of sin is almost always more inclusive than our own.

How do we take care of the poor? Is part of our weekly collection earmarked for people in need beyond our own parish? Are we concerned to build up our own parish "treasury" with no thought of the needs of others, especially the poor?

That's the trouble with being a follower of Jesus. There's always something to think about today that we hadn't even noticed yesterday.

NOVEMBER 18, 2012: THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

If our main source of Christian apocalyptic is the book of Revelation, we might not understand the message Mark is conveying in today's gospel pericope. We're liable to read something into it which isn't there.

Though Revelation also describes the "last days," it does so in the context of a theology which contradicts all other theologies in the Christian Scriptures. One day, while shopping, I saw a Mary Englebreit t-shirt sporting a biblical ecological message: "Do not damage the land or the sea or the trees." I was amazed when I saw it was from chapter 7 of Revelation - a book not noted for its ecological teachings. I quickly wandered into a nearby bookstore, picked up a Bible and checked it out. It actually was from Revelation 7, but it was only the first half of verse 3. Ms Englebreit had conveniently left out the rest. The next word in the verse is "until." The author basically says, "Don't do anything to the land, sea, or trees until I give the command, then wipe them out!" Now that's the book of Revelation I know - and don't love.

Of course, when one reads Daniel (the only apocalyptic book in the Hebrew Scriptures) one also finds lots of God-caused destruction. But as we hear in today's first reading, Yahweh doesn't get Yahweh's hands dirty in such a project. It's left to Michael to do the "cleaning up" before Yahweh's people receive their final reward.

Yet because we're in the Christian, not Hebrew Scriptures, it's appropriate for Dominic Crossan to point out how the revenge and destruction message of Revelation (and the Left Behind series based on it) is at odds with the message the gospel Jesus proclaims. As a Scripture scholar, and a Christian, Crossan can only speculate on the historical circumstances which enabled such a theology to be eventually accepted into the canon of the Christian Scriptures. I have no space here to present his speculations on how this book got into our Bible, but it's important to appreciate his concern.

Though chapter 13 contains Mark's apocalyptic "vision," his Jesus takes no revenge, nor destroys anything. His Jesus arrives on the scene only after humans and nature have wreaked havoc on the earth. He plays no role in either. Unlike Revelation, none of these calamities is looked upon as a punishment for evil people or a revengeful reward for the good folk. They're simply "stuff that the faithful in those days expected to happen before Jesus' second coming. Even many unbelievers thought the world's eventual end would be preceded by such natural catastrophes. Mark is simply saying, when that end comes, expect Jesus' arrival.

This rather peaceful picture of Jesus dovetails with the picture we find in our Hebrews reading. He's always "perfecting" his followers, even into eternity. As the author states, Jesus' "thing" is forgiveness, not vengeance. The text doesn't even say that Jesus physically made his enemies his footstool. They could have gotten themselves into that ignoble position by their own actions, without Jesus' help.

But there's still one troubling aspect in today's gospel. "Amen, I say to you," Jesus proclaims, "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." Obviously "this generation" has passed, and we're still waiting for the Parousia. Until Luke writes - probably in the mid-80s - our Christian sacred authors seem to believe Jesus will triumphantly return in their lifetime. Second and third generation followers of the risen Jesus eventually had to change the way they looked at and lived their faith once they began to understand his Parousia would be indefinitely delayed.

Makes one wonder what "faith-changes" still await us in the future, changes not even our biblical writers could have anticipated.