

NOVEMBER 17, 2013: THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Malachi 3:19-20a II Thessalonians 3:7-12 Luke 21:5-19

One of the nice things about watching a movie is knowing the director has already done the focusing for us. He or she has made certain the camera has zeroed in on what's significant, things we might miss if we were just watching the action take place cold turkey in front of us.

In a parallel way, our sacred authors do the same thing. They force us to focus on the significant aspects of the events they narrate, those aspects which reinforce the faith we and they profess.

As important as movie directors and sacred authors are in conveying to us the exact message of their works, there's just one problem: those who actually witnessed or were part of those significant events had to do their own focusing. There were no directors or sacred authors around to make certain they saw or heard the important stuff and ignored what wasn't.

Though we might fantasize about actually living in a biblical community, today's pericopes from II Thessalonians and Luke presume lots of people in both those churches were focused on the wrong aspects of the lives they were living.

The disciple of Paul responsible for II Thessalonians, for instance, is forced to remind his readers that faith in the risen Jesus isn't to become a haven for "freeloaders." Obviously some in his community are focusing on receiving, not giving. They've joined this particular church only because membership guarantees three square meals a day. The author reminds them of what Paul said in I Corinthians 9: "We (never) ate food received free from anyone.... We worked so as not to burden any of you." Then, in one of the classic lines in all Scripture he sets down the rule, "... If anyone is unwilling to work, neither should that one eat." Nothing could be clearer. The author is obviously living in the present, with all the problems that accompany the present;

We Christians are so accustomed to seeing Jesus as the end-all and be-all of our lives that we can't put ourselves in a time and place in which he was just one "Messiah" among many. We conveniently forget that his first followers had to pick him out of a crowd of messianic candidates. As we hear in today's gospel pericope, even after his death and resurrection, Jesus' disciples still had to deal with those who came "in his name" saying, "I am he," and "The time has come."

Different people had different expectations of the kind of salvation the Jewish Messiah was to offer. Not everyone bought into the dying/rising lifestyle which the Galilean carpenter was convinced would change them and the world around them for the better. Before Jerusalem's 70 CE destruction, many chose to believe in those Messiahs who preached a violent overthrow of Roman occupation. They certainly guaranteed a quicker, more definitive path to salvation than the vision Jesus offered.

But even in the mid-80s, when Luke writes, his readers still have a choice. Day by day they can choose to focus on the people and things on which Jesus focused or they can zero in on the people and things Jesus ignored. That's why the evangelist ends this passage with the comment, "By your perseverance you will secure your lives."

Our imitation of Jesus constantly involves choices. We pick what we see and how we see it. While, for instance, some people see only Malachi's consuming fire, Jesus' disciples see "the sun of justice with its healing rays." We all experience the same world. Followers of God are simply committed to experiencing it as God experiences it.

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NOVEMBER 24, 2013: CHRIST THE KING

II Samuel 5:1-3 Colossians 1:12-20 Luke 23:35-43

The late John McKenzie created quite a stir in the late 60s when he published what would become his most read book: *Authority in the Church*. This "pull-no-punches" Scripture scholar demonstrated that the vast majority of texts in the Christian Scriptures which deal with authority were triggered not by people ignoring or disrespecting the leadership in their various communities, but by the abusive ways in which that leadership was often exercised. Almost always, the communities' leaders, not the people created the problems the sacred authors encountered and were forced to address.

That's why today's feast of Christ the King is significant... and touchy. Since all Christian leadership should mirror Jesus' leadership, once we label Jesus a king, we have to be extremely careful how we define the title.

It's the title King of the Jews above Jesus' cross which prompts the Jewish rulers' taunt in today's gospel pericope. Given the common idea of royalty, if Jesus is a king he should be looking out primarily for himself, and immediately come down from the cross. Yet, Luke's Jesus is more concerned with the fate of the person crucified next to him than he is with his own. Throughout the evangelist's passion narrative, Jesus is always focusing on the needs of others. Only in this gospel does Jesus heal the man's severed ear in the garden, speak sympathetically to the women mourning his death, look at Peter after his denial, and forgive his crucifiers.

It's good to note that David had already been king of the southern half of Palestine - Judah - when the elders of the northern tribes - Israel - came to him in Hebron and asked him to unite all twelve tribes into one nation under his leadership. David's ability to bring people together was one of his best personality traits, a trait all good leaders should possess.

The disciple of Paul responsible for the letter to the Colossians finds that same characteristic in the risen Jesus. Quoting an early Christian hymn, he reminds his community, "For in him (Jesus) all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him, making peace by the blood of his cross through him, whether those on earth or those in heaven." There's no doubt the writer is well-versed in his mentor's insight into the Body of Christ. We can't be more one than to be part of the body of the person who unites us.

Mark gives us the clearest picture of Christian leadership in chapter 10 of his gospel. After Jesus tears into James and John for their insistence on one day being given the "glory seats," he clarifies what's at the heart of his kind of authority. "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." Christian leaders are unique. The only leader they can compare themselves to is Jesus.

I find it interesting that we're celebrating this year's feast of Christ the King with Francis as pope. Just as the gospel Jesus redefined king, so Francis day by day is redefining the papacy. Though the title remains, the reality behind it is constantly changing.

I presume no one in heaven is more pleased with this unexpected development than John McKenzie.

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