

FEBRUARY 2, 2014: PRESENTATION OF JESUS

Malachi 3:1-4 Hebrews 2:14-18 Luke 2:22-40

In preparing for today's liturgy, it would be very helpful to glance through the section on Jesus' Presentation in Raymond Brown's classic book, *The Birth of the Messiah*. One will quickly notice the late Scripture scholar spends a lot of time separating the theology Luke is actually trying to convey by narrating the event from the many pious, but often false ways people have treated that incident through the centuries.

Like all serious students of Scripture, Brown first demonstrates how Luke has combined two different Jewish practices into one happening. First, Torah regulations demanded every first born male be offered to Yahweh, then bought back. Second, after each birth, Jewish women were expected to go through a period purification before they could once again return to the formal practice of their faith. Though almost always fulfilled separately, the evangelist has Joseph and Mary carry out both these obligations in one action.

From today's Hebrews passage it's clear that the unknown author of the letter would look at Jesus presentation and Mary's purification as a sign Jesus actually identified with those he was sent to save from death. "He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every way, that he might. . . expiate the sins of the people." In the writer's theology, if Jesus wasn't human, he couldn't save humans. And nothing is more human than having to observe human laws.

It's significant that Luke mentions nothing about Joseph redeeming Jesus with the usual five shekel offering. The omission seems to be a way of saying this is one case in which the child remains Yahweh's property, a point Luke will develop throughout his gospel.

I remember as a child often looking at the Immaculate Heart of Mary picture my grandma had hanging her bedroom. The sword through Mary's heart especially attracted my attention. Much later I learned this particular image originated in Simeon's words to her during her purification ritual. "Behold, this child destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted - and you yourself a sword will pierce - so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

Basing their insights on this heart-piercing sword, many old-time commentators and homilists developed the idea that Mary, like her son, was destined to suffer for the salvation of the world. Yet, as Brown insists, it doesn't seem to be the image Luke is trying to convey to his readers.

Luke seems more interested in employing the sword as a symbol of judgment than as a metaphor for pain or suffering. The evangelist is convinced Jesus' teachings and life-style will force people to make decisions. Do follow we him or reject him? Do we imitate his dying and rising or look elsewhere for fulfillment in our lives? Luke presumes this sword of discernment cuts through everyone's heart, and he wants to make certain readers are on the right side of the cut.

The concept of having to choose God's way or the highway is a frequent biblical concept. For instance, today's first reading the prophet Malachi presumes his unknown messenger of Yahweh is an agent of judgment. "He is like the refiner's fire, or like the fuller's lye. He will sit refining and purifying silver, and will purify the sons of Levi." The true faith is expected to rise to the surface.

In Luke's case, Jesus will demand that Israelites choose between his reform and their "old time religion," just as Mary will have to one day decide between remaining just a physical family relative of Jesus, or joining new family of faith.

Such sword heart-piercing is an essential part of being other Christs. And Jesus is the swordsman.

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FEBRUARY 9, 2014: FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Isaiah 58:7-10 I Corinthians 2:1-5 Matthew 5:13-16

If Pope Francis has demonstrated anything in the first year of his leadership it's the conviction that no Christian is dispensed from being another Christ. No matter our ministry, each of us is expected to daily imitate Jesus' dying and rising. We Catholics have traditionally cut our leaders lots of slack when it comes to their living the life Jesus lived. Few of us complain when many of them engage in economic and social lifestyles two or three rungs above our own. They're also automatically dispensed from Jesus' Matthean prohibition of his followers accepting honorary titles or "places of honor." We often presume they're in our midst simply to tell us what Jesus wants us to do, not to actually demonstrate in their own lives what Jesus wants us to do. Francis has turned that widely-accepted, but unchristian leadership model upside down. He simply puts into practice what our Christian sacred authors encourage all their readers to do.

Matthew's Jesus, for instance, expects all his followers to imitate him - no exceptions. He gives no one a free ride. After beginning his well-known - but rarely followed - Sermon on the Mount by clicking off the Beatitudes, this Galilean carpenter then reminds his listeners how essential they are in spreading his message of dying and rising. "You are the salt of the earth . . . a city set on a mountain . . . a lamp which gives light to all in the house." Only when people actually experience our good deeds do they "glorify your heavenly Father." It isn't because of what we say, it's because of what we do.

Paul reminds his Corinthian community that he actually said very little when he originally evangelized them. He certainly didn't employ many "persuasive words of wisdom." On the contrary, he tells his readers, "I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling"If they eventually were to put faith in his words, they first had to experience the "power of God" at work in his actions. Since Paul "resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified," he had to show Jesus' dying and rising in the way he lived his own life.

As a good Jew, we presume one of the ways the Apostle concretely demonstrated the "mystery" he preached was by following Yahweh's Third-Isaiah command, "Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless, clothe the naked when you see them, and do not turn your back on your own."

This unnamed prophet was convinced that Yahweh's people would only become what Jesus later called a "lamp which gives light to all" by removing from their midst "oppression, false accusation and malicious speech," by bestowing their "bread on the hungry and satisfying the afflicted." When that generous giving of themselves finally happens, then " a light will rise for (them) in the darkness, and the gloom become for (them) like midday." This longed-for transformation from darkness to light will happen only when we stop talking and begin to act.

That's why Francis has been a breath of fresh air. He, like Jesus, Paul and Third-Isaiah, leads by example. His words have force because his lifestyle has force. If he can do what he does in his position, then, no matter our position, we can follow suit.

Too bad we don't have a fourth reading today. If we did I'd recommend something from the late Father James Keller, founder of the Christophers, something which contained his most famous statement: "It's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness." It's good to have a pope who's a candle lighter.

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