

MARCH 2, 2014: EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Isaiah 49:14-16a I Corinthians 2:1-5 Matthew 6:24-34

In his classic New Jerome Biblical Commentary article on Deutero-Isaiah, the late Carroll Stuhlmueller called today's first reading "one of the most touching expressions of divine love in the entire Bible." "But Zion said, 'Yahweh has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.' Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you. See, upon the palms of my hands I have written your name."

The 6th century BCE exiled Israelites had good reason to think Yahweh had forgotten them. They'd been in Babylon for almost 50 years before this unnamed prophet of consolation came on the scene. Most presumed they and their children would never again set foot in the Promised Land.

Deutero-Isaiah's first agenda item was simply to get his listeners to believe that God really cared about them and their predicament. Throughout the 16 chapters - 40-55 - for which he is responsible, he constantly hammers away at Yahweh's concern. Even a casual reader immediately surfaces that essential message of faith. The prophet was convinced that those who believe in Yahweh's word also believe in Yahweh's love.

Over 500 years later, as we hear in today's gospel pericope, Matthew's Jesus keeps hammering away at a parallel theme in his Sermon on the Mount. "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? ... If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is gone tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith?"

Instead of spending our time worrying about taking care of our physical needs, Jesus demands we worry about something else: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given you besides." In other words, if we're focused on surfacing God working effectively in our daily lives and concerned with living our lives as God wishes us to live them, then we have everything we'll ever need.

In our I Corinthians passage, Paul also shares a wish with his readers which isn't being met: the desire to have all followers of Jesus united in the same mindset. His wish certainly isn't being carried out by many of those he evangelized in Corinth. Instead of unity, the Apostle has not only discovered deep divisions in this Greek church, but he also has learned that his methods of evangelization are the basis for some of those divisions.

Yet those divisive attitudes don't stop him from carrying on his ministry. "It does not concern me in the least," Paul writes, "that I be judged by you or any human tribunal. I do not even pass judgment on myself." He only wants to be judged on one thing: "One should regard us as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." Paul only wants to be judged as being "trustworthy" in carrying out his ministry, even if some of those he serves never seem to understand the deeper purposes of his service.

Perhaps the most significant line in today's readings is Jesus' remark, "No one can serve two masters."

Those who serve Yahweh in the Hebrew Scriptures, and Jesus in the Christian Scriptures are expected to do so with everything in him or her. We're to have just one focus in life. There's to be no fudging in our service even when we don't feel all our needs are being met. Our sacred authors presume it's in the midst of our service that we actually find our life's true fulfillment. We have God's word on it.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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MARCH 9, 2014: FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT
Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7 Romans 5:12-19 Matthew 4:1-11

Have you ever wondered how we got today's first and third readings? Was the Genesis author actually present during the act of creation and the fall of the human race? Did Jesus take a sidekick into the wilderness with him who later told Matthew about his temptations?

I really got uptight when I learned in my first grade religion class that one of the effects of Adam and Eve's original sin was that we had to do homework, so upset that I complained to Sister Catherine that I shouldn't be punished for someone else's sin. She looked me right in the eye, smiled, and wisely said, "If they hadn't committed the original sin, Karban, you would have! So don't worry about it." Unknowingly she answered my first question long before I asked it.

Especially when it comes to temptation and sin, both the Yahwistic author of Genesis and Matthew begin with us, not Adam, Eve and Jesus. They're much more interested in what tempts their readers than in what actually tempted these famous biblical people.

It might or might not be significant that the snake the woman encounters in our Genesis pericope isn't the devil. Tenth century BCE Jews knew nothing of a personal perpetrator of evil. For the sake of the story, the snake is just the snake. But the argument which the snake employs is significant. "The moment you eat (the fruit) your eyes will be opened and you will be like the gods who know what is good and what is evil." In other words, you can ignore the plan of life Yahweh has for you, and go down a path which eventually leads to the evil of death. It's essential for a correct understanding of this passage to understand that to "know" in Hebrew almost always means to experience someone or something. In this context, evil was an experience Yahweh had planned to keep from the man and woman.

Without having been present at the time the fruit was eaten, our extremely observant Yahwistic author (a person many modern Scripture scholars believe was a woman!) knew that at the root of all sin is a decision to choose death over life, to choose an experience God wishes us to avoid. What's true for us must have been true for our ancestors.

It's interesting that this particular author dwells on our need to wear clothes. Every race of humans known to anthropologists covers some part of their bodies - though it might not be one of the parts we normally cover. The writer concludes that clothes are a sign something in our world is out of kilter. If it weren't we'd have no problem seeing ourselves and others as God made us.

Employing similar methodology, Matthew reasons that Jesus would have been tempted as his followers are constantly tempted. As other Christs we must decide daily whether we're just to care for people's physical needs (the stones into bread), be involved only in the spectacular (jumping from the temple's parapet), or strive to have power over others (the world's kingdoms.) The evangelist presumes the devil has never changed tactics. If one chooses to die and rise with Jesus, then this is what we can expect.

Of course, Paul sees our dying and rising as the one way to overcome those temptations. He reminds the Roman church, "If by the transgression of the one, the many died, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one man Jesus Christ overflow for the many."

If life is why we exist, why not imitate someone who achieved eternal life, someone who helps us overcome the lure of death which tempts every human?

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