

JULY 13, 2014: FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 55:10-11; Romans 8:18-23; Matthew 13:1-23

Deutero-Isaiah delivered one of the most hopeful messages in all of Scripture: Yahweh was finally ready to return the exiled Jews to the Promised Land. After more than 50 years in Babylon, this unnamed 6th century BCE prophet encouraged his fellow Israelites to start packing their bags and get the road ready. They were about to leave for home. There was just one problem: people demanded to know how Deutero-Isaiah could be so certain Yahweh was actually going to pull this off?

The prophet's response was a simple, "We have Yahweh's word on it."

Deutero-Isaiah seems to have been the first sacred author to develop an insight into the absolute power of God's word. But it's clear that later biblical writers were influenced by his insight. The Priestly author of Genesis, for instance, would fall back on the prophet's word-theology for his chapter 1 myth of creation – in which God creates by simply speaking the word. And John the Evangelist was certainly dependent on the idea when he began his gospel by describing Jesus as the Word of God.

After the prophet's martyrdom, his disciples artificially arranged his oracles into the sixteen chapters of Isaiah (40-55) in which we find them. So it's no accident that they ended their collection with the passage that comprise today's first reading, falling back on their mentor's emphasis on Yahweh's powerful word.

"Just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth. My word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it."

Contrary to the faith of our biblical ancestors, many of us Catholics are more secure following the word of our hierarchical authority figures than we are in following the word of God. We weren't even obligated "under pain of mortal sin" to hear that word proclaimed in our Eucharists. (We old-timers remember that a mortal sin for missing Mass on Sunday only kicked in if the "chalice was already uncovered" when we got to church. In other words, if the Liturgy of the Word was over and the Offertory had begun. With good timing, we could miss God's liturgical word for a lifetime and it would only add up to a venial sin!)

Jesus' earliest followers would have found that kind of morality preposterous. They were convinced that God's word was one of the most important parts of their faith. Matthew, for instance, shows the power of that word in today's gospel pericope. (Please ignore the second half of today's reading. It's simply an allegorical expansion of Jesus' original parable; something early preachers developed to explain a phenomenon the historical Jesus rarely experienced: apostasy.)

Most probably Jesus' parable about the sower and the seed was triggered by someone trying to convince him he was wasting his time preaching God's word. Using an image of the waste a farmer encounters when broadcasting seed, he basically agrees. But he then reminds his critic that what little seed finally catches on "produces fruit a hundred- or sixty- or thirty-fold." Nothing can stop God's word from having an effect in peoples' lives.

It certainly had an effect in Paul of Tarsus' life. Though the Apostle mentioned in Galatians that he had encountered the risen Jesus, he still had to live his life based only on the word of that "new creation." If he was convinced "the sufferings of this present time are nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us," that conviction came solely from his faith in God's word.

Maybe we should rethink the morality of our Mass attendance.

JULY 20, 2014: SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Wisdom 12:13, 16-19; Romans 8:26-27; Matthew 13:24-43

One of the most important discoveries coming from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's years of studying evolution is that it's normally the weakest link that survives; the strongest usually becomes extinct. The reason is simple: the weakest is forced to adapt, and adaptation is the key to evolution. Because the strongest frequently can't adapt when its environment or circumstances change it's doomed to disappear. We have no dinosaurs walking around today; they simply couldn't adapt to a changed environment.

The famed paleontologist and theologian observed that once evolution reached the stage of "reflexive consciousness" - not only are we conscious, we're conscious of being conscious - we change when we freely decide to change. He concluded that, at this point along the evolutionary road, the only force that can compel us to evolve is the force of love. In other words, we now must make a free, conscious decision to make ourselves weak.

Teilhard was convinced that, by insisting his followers give themselves for others, Jesus was actually handing us the blueprint for the next, essential stage in our evolution toward the "omega point:" that moment when all creation becomes one in God. Those who make themselves weak by loving will evolve; those who insist on falling back on their strength and refuse to love will become extinct.

Weakness is at the heart of our faith.

Our Wisdom author points out how even God becomes weak for our sake. In today's passage the writer reflects on one of Yahweh's best-known personality traits: forgiveness "Though you are master of might, you judge with clemency, and with much lenience you govern us; for power, whenever you will, attends you." Whenever someone forgives, someone gives up his or her power over others. Weakness is simply an essential element of forgiveness.

Paul seems to have surfaced the necessity of this weakness thing long before Teilhard began his research. He's convinced that during our weakest moments God becomes our strength. As he reminds the Christian community in Rome, "The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness." We can't do it alone.

Matthew's Jesus presumes weakness is even a part of God working effectively in our daily lives. Though two of today's three parables stress the growth of God's presence from ultra-small to ultra-large, the first parable assures us that God's kingdom will always be a "mixed bag." There's never going to be a time when communities committed to surfacing God or the risen Jesus in their life will be made up solely of wheat. Weeds will always be in the mix. Those waiting to make their move until everyone in a particular Christian community proves to be a faithful follower of Jesus are going to have a long wait. The gospel Jesus expects us to give ourselves to good and bad people; to those who are sincere, and to those who simply are along for the ride. When we choose to love, we choose not to discriminate. God will eventually take care of rewarding and punishing. Our job is to take care of loving.

The older I get, the more I appreciate our Catholic practice of creating "geographical parishes." Our communities are made up of anyone living in a certain area. We don't "go to this church" because everyone theologically agrees with us, or belongs to the same political party, or shares the same racial or ethnic background. We're expected to become church with all who show up on any particular weekend. Seems we could accomplish much more if we could work with people who are like ourselves.

Yet, as Teilhard would remind us, the weakness which forces members of a geographical parish to constantly adapt, is actually our strength, our guarantee we'll constantly evolve.