

AUGUST 24, 2014: TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 22: 19-23 Romans 11:33-36 Matthew 16:13-20

The implications of today's Romans passage are staggering. Listen carefully to Paul's praise of God's "wisdom and knowledge." "How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!" If that's true, then we who claim to be God's disciples have a huge task: to constantly apply God's inscrutable wisdom and unsearchable knowledge to whatever happens in our everyday life. How do we pull that off?

It's evident from our Isaiah passage that Yahweh's intimately interested in whatever transpires in our daily life, even to the point of arranging for a change in political power. (Our sacred authors would have found our distinction between church and state to be either puzzling or humorous.) If God's concerned about everything, then God's concerned about everything – no exceptions. But how do we make God's concerns our concerns?

Two months ago, on the feast of Peter and Paul - when we heard the same gospel pericope - I mentioned that no Scripture scholar today would employ these verses as a biblical proof text for the papacy. Matthew's purpose in composing this narrative is to stress Peter's faith in the risen Jesus, not his prerogative as the first infallible pope. It's that faith on which the Christian community is built. The evangelist zeroes in on the faith, not the person. As we see in Galatians 2, if one's faith in the risen Jesus begins to break down, then even Peter can make an egregious mistake, in this case, siding with the community's Judaizers instead of giving his wholehearted support to Paul's Gentile ministry. Perhaps that's why, as we'll hear in two weeks, Matthew's Jesus, in chapter 18, also gives the power to bind and loose to the whole Christian community – the same power which he gives only to Peter in chapter 16.

The quest to know God's will is a constant task for anyone who dares to follow God. There's no one person, no one institution, no one situation who's cornered the market on God's will. Our sacred authors presume our minds and hearts must always be open to surfacing that will even in situations, institutions, and persons in which we've never noticed it before.

I frequently quote the late Avery Dulles' aside in his 1969 St. Louis University Bellarmine lecture: "Had there been a Holy Office in the early church, we Catholics would have just one gospel in our bibles: Mark. But in our history books we'd have reference to three notorious early Christian heretics named Matthew, Luke and John." As significant as that remark is, it's just as important to remember that the famous Jesuit theologian's topic that night revolved around the Second Vatican Council's expansion of the church's magisterium. He stressed that the council's documents show that we can no longer rely just on papal decrees or conciliar statements to pinpoint God's will in our lives. Somehow the whole church – even the whole non-Catholic Christian community – must now be brought into the picture.

Both the earliest church and the biblical Jews presumed the usual way to surface God's will was to surface the community's prophets: those special individuals whom God inspires to be our conscience, to provide us with the future implications of our present actions. These are the people who consistently challenge us to return to the beginnings of our faith, who are able to cut through centuries of institutional addenda and recreate God's original plan for God's people.

Pope Francis' quest to get everyone's input into the Vatican's upcoming Synod on the Family is certainly a step toward that broader magisterium. Perhaps one of the papacy's most important tasks isn't always to tell us God's will, but to surface the prophets in the church whom God has inspired to do just that.

AUGUST 31, 2014: TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 20:7-9 Romans 12:1-2 Matthew 16:21-17

I mentioned last week that the usual biblical way to surface God's will in our lives is to surface the prophets in our lives. Today we hear that being the community's prophet is a painful ministry.

Normally we know only the prophet's words. Rarely are we privy to his or her feelings. The biblical prophets' disciples are good at collecting and arranging their oracles. But they almost never give us an insight into their mentors' hearts and minds. The two exceptions are Deutero-Isaiah and Jeremiah. In three of the four Songs of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh the former gives us a glimpse of his state of mind as he's preaching to the exiles in Babylon. In a similar way, chapters 10-20 of Jeremiah are interspersed with the prophet's biting "confessions:" his reflections on his relationship with Yahweh and the problems which his ministry creates.

Today's first reading is by far one of the most depressing in all of Scripture. Not only does Jeremiah's message revolve around "violence and outrage," but his ministry has resulted in his being "an object of laughter." He faces "derision and reproach all the day." Though he tries to get out of it, he quickly discovers it's like resigning from the mafia. "I say to myself, I will not mention him (Yahweh), I will speak in his name no more. But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in. I cannot endure it." He's trapped!

Yet, the most disturbing aspect of Jeremiah's prophesying is his claim that Yahweh originally tricked him into volunteering for it. "You duped me, O Yahweh, and I let myself be duped." Carroll Stuhlmueller always insisted that the English word "duped" doesn't accurately convey the meaning of the original Hebrew. In other biblical passages, the word not only has the meaning of rape, but the forcible rape of a helpless person. That type of abuse can also be understood in the words, "You were too strong for me, and you triumphed."

Just as a child I was warned never to get into a stranger's car, Jeremiah's basically telling us that he's never been the same since he got into Yahweh's car. His whole life has been destroyed.

No wonder Paul reminds the Christian community in Rome, ". . . Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice Do not conform ourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you might discern what is the will of God." Anyone who commits himself or herself to surfacing the will of God must expect suffering, especially if they try to convey that will to their communities.

Matthew's Jesus agrees. "Those who wish to come after me must deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow me. For those who wish to save their lives will lose them, but whoever loses their lives for my sake will find them."

Among the five criteria for distinguishing real prophets from fakes, two state that not only does the authentic prophet suffer for delivering his or her message, but those who carry out their message, will also suffer. That seems to be why Peter "rebukes" the prophetic Jesus when he talks about the suffering he expects to endure for his preaching and lifestyle.

Jesus has little patience with him. "Get behind me Satan! You are an obstacle to me." The historical Jesus was convinced that if Peter was serious about conveying God's word, he'd also have to be serious about enduring the pain that word would bring.

Jeremiah, Paul and Jesus knew nothing of the "painless faith" many of us think we can and should achieve.