

OCTOBER 19, 2014: TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 45:1, 4-5 I Thessalonians 1:1-5b Matthew 22:15-21

One surprising side-effect of studying Scripture critically is the ability to experience one's faith life without a constant dependence on Scripture. Instead of just slavishly looking up and memorizing Scripture quotes, we begin to meld into the mind-set of the sacred authors, replacing our value system with theirs, looking at everything and everyone around us through their eyes.

If we immerse ourselves correctly in God's word, our experiences of God will always break through the limits all organized religions impose. We'll eventually start to go one on one with the uniquely holy one: the entity in the universe who is completely "other," quickly discovering that both our minds and our faith are continually expanding. We can never be certain from which direction God will come into our lives, nor what God will expect of us once we surface his/her eye-opening and value-changing presence.

People formed by biblical faith constantly "hang loose." They approach reality from a unique perspective. Remember how Mark's Jesus answers Bartimaeus' chapter 10 request, "I want to see." Contrary to expectation, he doesn't say, "Receive your sight." He simply responds, "Go your way, your faith has saved you." Our faith enables us to see what others miss.

Nowhere is this better exemplified than in today's Deutero-Isaiah passage. The exiled Israelites who actually believed this unnamed prophet's message to get ready to return to the Promised Land had just one basic question. "If our leaving Babylon is going to be a new Exodus, who's going to be the new Moses? Who among us has Yahweh chosen to lead us out of here?"

Deutero-Isaiah doesn't beat around the bush. He immediately names a name. "Thus says Yahweh to his anointed, Cyrus, whose right hand I grasp." An unbelievable choice! Cyrus is the uncircumcised, pagan, 6th century BCE dictator of Persia. Yahweh's handpicked "messiah" (the Hebrew word for anointed), the liberator of Yahweh's people isn't even a Jew! Employing our Christian terminology, he's "Cyrus, the Christ." "I have called you by your name," Yahweh declares, "giving you a title, though you knew me not."

How does the prophet know Cyrus is the messiah? He simply reads the daily newspaper. Cyrus not only is conquering one country after another, Cyrus also grants religious freedom to those he conquers. When he eventually subdues Babylon, the prophet presumes he'll let the captive Jews return to Jerusalem, rebuild their temple and practice their religion. (Which is what more or less actually happened.)

I presume many in Deutero-Isaiah's audience walked away shaking their heads when they heard Cyrus' name, convinced this particular prophet wasn't Yahweh's mouthpiece. Their God worked through Jews for Jews. Gentiles had their own gods. Why would Yahweh employ a non-Jew to save Jews?

Paul's faith experience is parallel to Deutero-Isaiah's. Though he's personally convinced a non-Jew can be as much another Christ as a Jew, it's important he see this happen in the concrete. His evangelization of Thessalonica proved his point. The Gentiles who committed themselves to dying and rising with Jesus have turned out to be just as good Christians as their Jewish brothers and sisters. In this earliest Christian writing we possess, the Apostle sings the praises of this non-Jewish community. Both this week and next, we'll hear him boast about these people, specially "chosen" and "loved" by God.

Even Matthew's Jesus expects us to broaden the field in which God works. After giving a practical answer to the question of paying taxes, he reminds us, "(Pay) to God what belongs to God." He presumes the census tax coin, the pocket in which it's kept, and the person who owns it all belong to God. But it still takes lots of biblical faith to stop dividing reality into areas in which God's welcome and in which God's excluded.

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OCTOBER 26, 2014: THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Exodus 22:20-26 I Thessalonians 1:5c-10 Matthew 22:34-40

Biblical followers of God are known not only by how they relate to God, but also by how they relate to others. They do so from a completely different perspective than those who do not share their faith.

Ken Burns' recent PBS series on the Roosevelts pointed out how each of these three persons dramatically changed how the United States government related to its citizens. Coming from a concept of government which basically stayed out of the way of individuals, permitting them to rise or fall according to their own talents and industriousness, Theodore, Franklin, and Eleanor approached politics with the conviction that government should also help those who, through no fault of their own, found themselves in dire straits. Franklin especially pushed through legislation which guaranteed such now-accepted programs as social security, unemployment insurance, union recognition, maximum working hours and minimum wage. By 1940, our government was involved in areas no one could have foreseen just 50 years earlier. Not only were people being permitted to become what they wished to become, they were actually being helped to become what they wished to become.

In many ways, our American government became what our sacred authors presumed every authentic follower of God should become: a person who would daily give themselves for all around them. Even when the Jewish monarchy came into existence during the last part of the 11th century, BCE, its kings were quite unlike their pagan counterparts. The latter were normally chosen because they guaranteed security for the powerful. Jewish kings, on the contrary, were chosen to help the powerless. They were expected to defend the rights of those who couldn't defend themselves.

The great Hans Walter Wolff frequently reminded us that there were three groups of people who could knock on the palace door 24/7, and the king was obligated to grant them an audience: widows, orphans and resident aliens. Jewish kings knew that one of the main reasons Yahweh put them on the throne was to champion their rights in a world in which many people ran roughshod over them.

These are the same three categories of people mentioned in today's Exodus pericope. How Yahweh's people deal with the helpless is how the ancient Israelites expected Yahweh to deal with them. "If (the poor man) cries out to me," Yahweh declares, "I will hear him; for I am compassionate." Those who follow God are presumed to imitate God.

The reform which the historical Jesus preached was rooted in the same idea of social justice as our Exodus passage. Not only are his followers to love Yahweh, (their) God, they're also to love their neighbor as themselves. As we hear in today's gospel, Matthew's Jesus takes for granted that our love of one another concretely demonstrates our love of God. "The whole law and the prophets (the biblical way of talking about the bible) depend on these two commandments."

Having referenced the Roosevelts above, there's a significant line in our I Thessalonians reading. Paul reminds his readers that they initially "received the word in great affliction." Though we don't know exactly to what he's referring, it's important that from that point of suffering they committed themselves to imitate Jesus' dying and rising. On several occasions during the 7 part series, Burns asked some well-known historians if T.R., F.D.R., and Eleanor would have accomplished what they accomplished if each hadn't undergone great physical and/or psychological pain at some point of their lives. The consensus was, "No." It was their suffering which most made them conscious of the suffering of others.

It's only when we're helpless that the helpless enter our field of vision.

Loving others always make us helpless. It's the one action which is guaranteed to give us the same perspective on others that Jesus of Nazareth had.

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