

NOVEMBER 2, 1014: ALL SOULS
Wisdom 3:1-9 Romans 6:3-9 Matthew 25:31-46

My grade school catechism explained away the lack of references to heaven in the Hebrew Scriptures by contending that the “gates of heaven” were closed the instant Adam and Eve committed their original sin. Since no one could get into heaven before Jesus’ arrival, there was no need to bring up the subject.

The actual biblical answer is less complicated: the ancient Jews had no concept of an afterlife as we know it until about 100 years before Jesus’ birth – about the same time the book of Wisdom was composed. Most simply believed everyone ended up in Sheol after death; sort of a state of suspended animation in which the dead knew what was going on, but couldn’t do anything to change it.

The Pharisees were the first Jews to reach the insight that life with Yahweh could go on after our physical deaths. Their reasoning was unique. Everyone believed Yahweh, who is eternal, could form relationships with human beings. If Yahweh chooses to maintain those relationships after people die, then they also will be eternal. They’ll be relating to and with Yahweh forever.

The Pharisees succinctly state their novel belief in Wisdom 1:15: “Justice is undying.” The word “justice” is the normal biblical term for the relationship Yahweh wants individuals to have with him/her, the kind of relationship which will enable us to step into eternity with Yahweh. We’ll never die. We’ll be “in the hand of God . . . abiding with him in love.” There’s much more to life than just the here and now.

Paul of Tarsus (also a Pharisee) believes the best way to become one with God is to become one with the risen Jesus. He reminds the church in Rome that their formal relationship with the Christ began with baptism, a ritual which employed an outward sign demonstrating their commitment to die and rise with the Christ. Unlike most modern baptisms in which candidates have a few drops of water poured over their foreheads, early church baptisms always entailed totally immersing the catechumens in water – an outward sign of their commitment to die and be buried with Jesus. Then, dripping wet, they were immediately pulled up from the water – symbolizing their rising with Jesus.

The Apostle perfectly summarizes the meaning of this action in just two sentences. “If then we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him.” It also no longer has power over those who have become one with Christ.

The normal biblical way we demonstrate we’ve become one in dying with Jesus is to die by becoming one with those around us – especially the most helpless. This realization helps Matthew’s Jesus to create one of the best-known passages in the Christian Scriptures. The criterion the king employs to separate sheep from goats revolves around just one thing: the determination to become one with those who, in certain situations, can’t help themselves. In each case, Jesus insists, “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me.”

We’d naturally expect the rejected goats to ask, “When did we see you hungry or thirsty . . . ?” But the sheep ask the identical question. Obviously not even those who are committed to being other Christs always see the risen Christ in everyone they help. That’s a big part of the death entailed in dying with Jesus. Only our faith gives us the sight Jesus wants us to have, the faith which makes our relationship with God and others the most important part of our daily lives, the only part that guarantees us eternal life.

NOVEMBER 9, 2014: DEDICATION OF THE LATERAN BASILICA

Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12 I Corinthians 3:9c-11, 16-17 John 2:13-22

I'm certain that one of the two people who will be in purgatory until Jesus' Parousia is the first person who referred to a building as a church.

For the first centuries of Christianity the word church only designated the community of believers who followed and imitated the risen Jesus in their midst. That's certainly the way Paul employed the term in I Corinthians 11 when he spoke about the community "gathering as church." Jesus' earliest followers met not in special buildings, but in homes. Even then, the followers were the church, not the home.

Things and terminology changed after Constantine's 313 Edict of Milan, granting Christians the same rights and privileges enjoyed by other religions in the Empire. What had been the exception now became the rule. Christians began regularly to meet in basilicas – public halls – for their liturgies, eventually deserting their homes for these new, more convenient venues.

At that point, today's Ezekiel passage became significant. Just as the waters flowing from the reconstructed Jerusalem temple brought life wherever they went, so Christians were convinced the actions taking place in these special buildings also brought life to those who participated in them.

Only because there are no texts in the Christian Scriptures which support the building of church structures, those who eventually created our liturgy for today's feast were forced to employ a passage (I Corinthians 3) which speaks of the people as "God's building."

Paul, writing ten or twelve years before the Jerusalem temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, was forced to deal with a thorny situation. Though more and more Gentiles were buying into the reform the historical Jesus preached and lived, they, unlike their Jewish/Christian counterparts, were forbidden by Jewish law from even entering that sacred site.

The Apostle's message in today's pericope is one of "Don't worry about it." After all, he reminds the Gentile/Christian community in Corinth, ". . . You are the temple of God, and . . . the Spirit of God dwells in you." What the Jerusalem temple hoped to achieve through Yahweh's special presence, God has already achieved through the Spirit's special presence in Jesus' disciples. We shouldn't long for something we already have – in spades.

Yet, while we're waiting to totally morph into the temple of God's Spirit, John's Jesus warns us to make certain we properly use the church buildings we've constructed. This itinerant preaching carpenter from Capernaum was convinced some of his fellow-Jews had lost sight of why their ancestors had originally built the Jerusalem temple. Instead of offering the faithful an opportunity to worship Yahweh, it had simply become a site for making money.

John's three Synoptic predecessors had Jesus quote Jeremiah's famous chapter 7 temple speech as he cleared the sacred premises of the traders and sellers: "My house shall be a house of prayer for all people, but you have turned it into a den of thieves." When I'm teaching those three gospels, I often remind my students that the den is usually not the place where thieves do their thieving; it's the place they run to after they thieve for security. In those writings, Jesus' message is very biting. Instead of organized religion providing occasions for us to go out and give ourselves to all people, there are times when it actually helps us be secure and safe in our sinning.

Yet, even here, John takes the emphasis off the actual temple and puts it on Jesus. He becomes the only temple Christians have and need.

The late Cardinal John Wright once asked us seminarians, "What would happen if every church-owned building were simultaneously destroyed?" His response: "We'd have to go back to the faith Jesus left us."

Maybe it's worth a try.