

JUNE 28TH, 2015: THIRTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24 II Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13-15 Mark 5:21-43

Today's Wisdom pericope is one of the most important in Scripture. Among other things, it answers a question which has bugged scholars for centuries: what triggered Pharisees, about a hundred years before the birth of Jesus, to start believing in an afterlife?

Until recently, most experts believed that some Jews had simply read the works of the classic Greek philosophers, thinkers like Aristotle, Socrates and Plato, who presumed, because we had an immaterial soul, that our lives would continue even after our physical deaths. The only problem was there was no "smoking gun." No one could track down who exactly read whom, and when.

Then recently, those scholars who, like the late Roland Murphy, specialized in "wisdom literature" began to understand the answer had been right in front of them all along. It was in one verse of today's first reading: "justice is undying."

The Hebrew word employed here for justice (or "righteousness") refers to the relationship individuals have with Yahweh and the people around them. Though all Jews agreed Yahweh is immortal, Pharisees went one step further. They reasoned that if you enter into a relationship with the never-dying Yahweh, and Yahweh decides to maintain that relationship, then you also will never die.

The big question is, "How does one know one has the kind of relationship with Yahweh which guarantees eternal life?" Jesus answered that by having his followers focus on their relationship with others. Paul, for instance, asks the Corinthian church to imitate Jesus by focusing on the needs of those around them. Just as he, "for your sake became poor . . . so your abidance at the present time should supply" the necessities for the poor in your midst. As always, the Apostle's goal is to create "equality" in those who are committed to integrating Jesus' dying and rising into their daily lives.

In today's gospel selection, Mark tells his readers that other Christs should demonstrate their dedication to justice not only by eradicating as much physical death as possible, but also by improving the quality of life for anyone suffering from illness or chronic pain.

Those familiar with Mark will immediately recognize the literary device he often uses to show a passage of time. He'll start a story, interrupt it with another story, then return to the original. In this case, it's going to take time for Jesus to get to Jarius' home, so, on the way, the evangelist has Jesus encounter a woman suffering from uterine bleeding. After she's cured of her malady, we return to the Jarius narrative.

Every time Mark uses this device, he gives us stories which have common elements. Both narratives today, for instance, have to do with women, both share the number 12, and most important, each focuses on faith. Though many people were "pressing upon" Jesus on the road to Jarius' house, only one touches him with faith; a faith which eventually "saves" her. In a parallel way, when told of the girl's death, Jesus encourages her father, "Do not be afraid; just have faith." Only because of Jarius' faith is Jesus able to resuscitate her.

In dealing with justice, our Christian biblical authors encourage their readers not only to have faith in their relationship with the risen Jesus among them, but also to have faith in their relationships with those they encounter in their everyday lives. We're simply expected to keep relating.

In every situation, our relationships should always be life-giving, both to us and those with whom we relate. The life we develop by being just with others, is the one element which guarantees we'll always experience life, even into eternity.

JULY 5TH, 2015: FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ezekiel 2:2-5 II Corinthians 12:7-10 Mark 6:1-6

Today's II Corinthians passage contains two of the most significant statements in all of Christian literature: "power is made perfect in weakness," and "when I am weak, then I am strong."

Though Paul normally comes across as possessing a strong personality, in this part of his second letter to the community in Corinth, he zeroes in on his weakness. Though we can't be certain what his "thorn in the flesh" actually is, most commentators today believe it's malaria: a condition which comes and goes, but always leaves someone in a weakened condition, unable to accomplish what he or she intends to accomplish. If so, this must have been the biggest drawback to Paul's itinerant preaching ministry.

Yet instead of moping and complaining about his Achilles heel, Paul sees it as part of the risen Jesus' plan for him. He believes the Lord has graced him so sufficiently that he, with the Lord's help, can even overcome an obstacle which would stop most others from carrying out their God-given work. "I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me." In other words, the Apostle is convinced that if he had no obstacles to his work, he might actually be tempted to believe that it was he, and not the Christ, who was accomplishing those amazing things.

Such confidence in God working through us, in spite of our failures, is also a frequent theme in the Hebrew Scriptures. The disciples of Ezekiel who saved and put his oracles into the form we have them today included this insight in the prophet's initial call narrative. Yahweh warns, "Hard of face and obstinate of heart are they to whom I am sending you. . . . And whether they heed or resist – for they are a rebellious house – they shall know that a prophet has been among them." Yahweh's only interested in keeping his promise to send prophets to his people. Whether they fail or succeed is irrelevant. Failure is not only an option for prophets, it's a normal part of their ministry.

That seems to be why Mark includes Jesus'-return-to-Nazareth narrative in his gospel. It can only be seen as Jesus' failure in prophetically preaching to the residents of his own hometown.

This passage so zeroes in on the historical Jesus' limitations that Matthew, in copying it about ten years later, changed it in two significant ways. Because carpenters weren't highly thought of in Palestine during the first third of the first century CE, the second gospel writer altered the people's comment, "Is he not the carpenter . . . ?" to "Is this not the carpenter's son?" He also changed Mark's comment, "He was not able to perform any mighty deed there" to "He did not work many mighty deeds there" Quite a huge difference between could not and did not. Fortunately for us, Mark wasn't afraid to say there were some things not even Jesus could do; some things which depended on peoples' faith in him.

I presume if there weren't some in the community for which the evangelist composed his gospel who were failing in the various areas in which the risen Jesus was calling them to minister, we'd know nothing of Jesus' disastrous return to Nazareth. Just like Paul, 25 years later, Mark was convinced that something had to be said about weakness and failure. It was an essential part of the Christian experience.

To put it bluntly. If we always succeed in everything we think the risen Jesus expects us to do, we might not actually be doing what he expects us to do.

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