

SEPTEMBER 6TH, 2015: TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 35:4-7a James 2:1-5 Mark 7:31-37

The “messianic secret” is a big thing in Mark’s gospel.

On eight different occasions throughout his first nine chapters, whenever one of Jesus’ fellow Jews addresses him with a messianic title, he consistently tells them, “Shut up!” He not only wants them to cease and desist using such titles, he even warns them against telling others they suspect he could be their longed-for Messiah.

In today’s gospel pericope, for instance, after curing the deaf and mute man, “He ordered them not to tell anyone. But the more he ordered them not to, the more they proclaimed it.”

Though some scholars originally thought this “secret stuff” was a device invented by Jesus’ earliest followers to defend their lack of understanding who he actually was – “We knew, but he told us not to tell”- most modern experts believe it actually goes back to the historical Jesus.

Why wouldn’t he want people around him to know what Christians today presume he was? After all, as we hear in our first reading, Isaiah assures his listeners that when Yahweh eventually comes on earth to “vindicate” his/her people, “The eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then the lame will leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing.” Jesus accomplishes two of these four in today’s passage.

But as we all know, titles can be misleading. (It’s clear to me personally that, after the sexual abuse scandal, the title “priest” could contain certain dimensions it didn’t have when I was first ordained.) During the historical Jesus’ day and age, for instance, “Messiah” carried much more baggage than the concepts Isaiah mentioned six centuries before. Among other things, most early first century BCE Palestinian Jews believed their special savior would be a military figure, riding into Jerusalem one day on horseback to liberate them from the hated Roman occupation. (That seems to be why all the evangelists mention that on Palm Sunday Jesus comes into the city riding a donkey.) If Jesus accepted messianic titles, he would also be accepting the concepts those titles contained.

In a very real sense, he was telling his people that they had to develop a new concept of Messiah. They first had to understand who he was, then take it from there. Not vice versa. The late Raymond Brown once warned the priests of our diocese about criticizing the vast majority of Jews who never recognized – and still don’t recognize - Jesus as their Messiah. “That Messiah has yet to come,” he said. “Jesus of Nazareth certainly wasn’t the person they were expecting.”

The author of James’ letter points out the dangers to the community when we relate to certain individuals as “poor” and others as “rich.” Such titles stop us from recognizing that God chose both “to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.”

Perhaps that’s why we also have to be careful about getting lost in the titles we have for Jesus. The risen Jesus might be our God and Savior, but he/she is also someone unique in our lives; someone who goes beyond any title.

I presume that couples intimate with one another will, in public, call each by their proper names, or diminutives of them. Might even refer to a husband or wife as “honey,” or “dear.” But I also presume in their special moments of intimacy they will address their spouses with titles they never employ in public, titles which express their unique love for one another.

How do we refer to the risen Jesus when we intimately experience him/her in our daily lives? If we just employ his formal “church” titles, we might not be intimate enough.

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SEPTEMBER 13TH, 2015: TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 50:5-9a James 2:14-18 Mark 8:27-35

Today's gospel pericope is one proof that our gospels were never intended to be biographies of Jesus. Rather, they're mostly artificial collections of his sayings, miracles and actions, ordered in ways to help his second and third generation followers along the path of dying and rising with him.

Our passage, along with two other parallel passages, was ingeniously constructed so they could be easily memorized. Each of the three (8:31-35, 9:30-37, 10:32-45) begins with Jesus predicting his passion, death and resurrection, immediately followed by one or the other of his disciples saying or doing something which demonstrates a total misunderstanding of what it means to die with him. The passage always ends with Jesus clarifying what such a death entails.

Peter receives the honor of presenting the first misunderstanding and receiving the first rebuke: "Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do." His faith in Jesus as the Messiah doesn't carry over to Jesus as the suffering Messiah, especially if he's expected to share in his suffering.

In all three dying/rising narratives, Jesus' clarification points out exactly how he wants his followers to die with him. He begins the process in this passage by insisting, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

Most scholars point out that the historical Jesus probably didn't formulate this statement exactly the way it's expressed here. Carrying one's cross wouldn't have meant anything until after Jesus' death on a cross. The going opinion is that he encouraged his followers to carry their "tau," not their cross. The tau, a T, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, carried a specific religious meaning during Jesus' day and age. Pious Israelites were often encouraged to follow Yahweh's will, from A to Z. In Hebrew that would be from alpha to tau, eventually shortened to just follow whatever Yahweh wanted to the tau.

It's easy to understand how tau was replaced by cross at the time of Mark's gospel. Because of its T shape, it was a common nickname for a crucifix. And after Jesus' death and resurrection, his crucifixion became the epitome of his dedication to Yahweh's will. Yet, if we go back to its original meaning, to carry one's tau signified one's willingness to do whatever God wanted of him or her, no matter the cost.

That's why today's Deutero-Isaiah reading is a perfect fit for the gospel. Comprising a large part of the prophet's Third Song of the Suffering Servant, it begins with the reflection, "Morning after morning Yahweh God opens my ear that I may hear; and I have not rebelled have not turned back." The late Carroll Stuhlmueller always insisted that this is the best definition of a disciple of God in the entire Bible. Each morning true followers hit the floor listening, trying to discern what God is expecting of them today that they hadn't noticed yesterday, even when that entails suffering, as it did for Deutero-Isaiah, and for Jesus.

The author of James' letter agrees. He, for instance, hears the risen Jesus telling us that we're to give more than pious platitudes to those in need. "If faith does not have works, it is dead." Only by constantly listening for God's will can we discern what works he/she expects of us, even if they entail suffering.

Marcan experts presume the evangelist, as a good pastor, was constructed these three dying/rising passages because he noticed some in his community believing they could rise with Jesus without dying with Jesus. Thank goodness that doesn't seem to be a problem for us modern Christians. But then again, why are three specific readings proclaimed today throughout the Christian world?

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