

JANUARY 31ST, 2016, FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19 I Corinthians 12:31-13:13 Luke 4:21-30

I presume most of us don't worry about even coming close to being martyred for our faith as Jeremiah and Jesus did during their ministries. We know from reading Jeremiah's "confessions" (chapters 10-20) that the prophet constantly had to deal with people who wanted him dead. And Jesus' encounter with his hometown folk in our gospel pericope demonstrates how frequently his ministry brought him to the "edge."

On second thought, perhaps we shouldn't boast about our distance from martyrdom. If we're supposed to be "other Christs" and the first Christ was martyred on Golgotha, should we be proud that we've avoided that part of the historical Jesus' ministry?

In the chapter preceding our I Corinthians passage – last week's reading – Paul stated his conviction that the Holy Spirit had given every follower of the risen Jesus a unique gift; a talent which made him or her a special part of the body of Christ. Though the Apostle lists only eight of these special abilities, we presume there are as many unique gifts as there are disciples of Jesus; each given "for the common good," each when used together with the gifts of those other Christs around us help to make the risen Jesus present in this world.

The problem is that some of us are still waiting for those gifts to appear in our lives. We presume one day the Spirit will make a miraculous appearance, tap us on our foreheads, and zap! we're gifted. My experience with the permanent diaconate years ago convinced me that's not how it works.

One of my tasks was to find out if those who applied for this ministry possessed the special characteristics which would make them good deacons. We quickly learned, for instance, that the abilities which an effective priest possesses aren't the same which an effective deacon has. But we also discovered that someone's unique gifts were always part of that individual's personality. There wasn't a time in their lives when they weren't part of who that person was. That's why most of the candidates never recognized them as the Spirit's gifts.

As I was giving the men "feedback" on what we'd discovered about their gifts, their wives, usually sitting next to them, would often give them a gentle nudge and remark, "I've been telling you this for years, but you never listen to me." Just as Jeremiah was already dedicated as a prophet in his mother's womb, so are we dedicated as parts of the risen Jesus' body in our mother's womb.

I, for instance, "by nature" can mentally order parts of a homily or a college class in just a few seconds. As far back as I can remember, I could always think well on my feet. (Adolf Hitler had the same gift. But he certainly didn't use it for the common good.) On the other hand, I'm the messiest housekeeper around. I never know what to keep or what to throw away. The Spirit hasn't gifted me with that ability.

As we hear in today's second reading, Paul's main concern for his Corinthian community isn't that they "get gifted," it's that they use the spiritual gifts they already have with the love which will help them build up the body of Christ.

If we can't immediately surface our unique gifts, we should check with someone close to us. (A husband or wife would be perfect.) But once we find out what they are, we should reflect on how we've used them. If we constantly employ them with love, then we're using them as the Spirit intended. Of course, if we do so, we might also reflect on how close we also come to Jesus' and Jeremiah's "edge."

FEBRUARY 7TH, 2016: FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Isaiah 6:1-2a, 3-8 I Corinthians 15:1-11 Luke 5:1-11

Today's I Corinthians pericope contains the earliest account of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances we possess, predating our earliest gospel narratives by more than ten years. Though scholars constantly study and comment on it, most Christians have little familiarity with it. Usually we combine the different (often contradictory) apparition passages and create a unified account of our own making, leaving out whatever doesn't fit into our personal narrative.

But if we zero in just on today's reading, we surface some interesting traditions. Though later gospel accounts will refer to the risen Jesus "appearing to Cephas, then to the Twelve," this is the only place which speaks about him/her "appearing to more than five hundred brothers at once," and also mentions a unique appearance to James.

It's clear that when we join these first verses of I Corinthians 15 with the last chapter(s) of the four gospels, we have at least a half dozen different versions of what happened at the tomb on Easter Sunday morning, and during the next few days (or weeks.) If our faith in the risen Jesus is rooted only in these narratives, we're in trouble. They'd never stand up in a court of law.

That's why Paul's reference to his own encounter with this "new creation" is the most important part of the pericope. "Last of all," he writes, "as to one born abnormally, he appeared to me." If he/she hadn't personally appeared to the Apostle, the other apparitions he lists wouldn't have been significant.

It's essential to our faith to have had some personal experience of the risen Jesus. Though, as we know from Paul's letters and the gospels, the early Christian community was convinced the "normal" way to achieve that experience was by participating in the Eucharist, followers of Jesus also discovered they could encounter the Christ in quite unexpected situations.

Paul's experience on the road to Damascus provides a classic example of such an encounter. Narrated three times in the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's meeting with the risen Jesus not only was unexpected, it ran completely counter to "form." The Apostle wasn't traveling to the Syrian capital to go shopping or visit some friends: he was going there to persecute followers of Jesus. When the Jesus of faith appeared to him, he was an active enemy of that faith! Obviously the condition of one's soul or mind is never a prerequisite for encountering the risen Jesus.

The prophet Isaiah discovers this in today's first reading. In this well-known chapter 6 call narrative, the prophet tries to sidestep Yahweh's call by pointing out, "I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips." In other words, the young man wonders, "How can I be your mouthpiece, proclaiming your holy oracles, when unholy words usually come from my mouth?" To Isaiah's surprise, Yahweh not only calls, Yahweh also makes carrying out that call a possibility.

It's important to note that many Lucan scholars regard today's gospel pericope as a post-resurrection event which the evangelist – for theological reasons - has read back into Jesus' historical ministry. (We probably see the chronologically correct narrative in John 21.) If that's correct, then Simon is relating to the risen Jesus, not the historical Jesus. And it's in encountering the risen Jesus that this frustrated fisherman is led to say, "Depart from me, Lord, for I a sinful man." Yet that declaration of sinfulness doesn't stop Jesus from calling Simon "to catch people" instead of fish.

Today's readings certainly fly in the face of the non-biblical belief that we have a better chance of surfacing the risen Jesus after we come out of the confessional than before we go into the confessional.