

MAY 29TH, 2016: THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

Genesis 14:18-20 I Corinthians 11:23-26 Luke 9:11b-17

There was once a time in my uncritical life when I thought the Mass I regularly experienced in the 1950s was the exact Mass Jesus had “instituted” during his Last Supper and the church had faithfully passed on for almost 20 centuries – including the vestments and Latin. But then I read Joseph Jungmann’s double volume work *The Mass of the Roman Rite*. I presume many Vatican II bishops also read this Austrian Jesuit’s classic work, otherwise they wouldn’t have reformed the Eucharist.

The pre-Vatican II Mass was far removed from the Eucharist Jesus’ earliest followers celebrated. To quote Martin Luther’s famous 16th century insight, “The church had turned an action into a thing.” Catholics simply were expected to “attend” or “hear” Mass. The only way they participated in it was to be somehow present when it took place. As Jungmann wrote, during the Renaissance, it was widely regarded as a “performance,” on the same level as a play or opera. Especially during “High Mass” people expected to be entertained.

We find none of this nonsense in today’s readings.

For biblical Christians, the Eucharist was an action, an action in which they not only participated, but an action in which they died and rose, constantly surfacing the risen Jesus in the process.

Paul zeroes in on the dying dimension in our I Corinthians pericope. The late Raymond Brown always insisted that what triggered this earliest account of what Jesus said and did on the night before he died was, “Some drunkards in the Corinthian community.”

The Eucharist during Paul’s day and age was akin to a pot luck meal. Everyone was expected to bring something and share it with all the participants. The problem in Corinth revolved around certain members – slaves and the poor – who couldn’t bring anything to share. Some of the well-to-do not only resented this, they actually told the poor the Lord’s Supper started at 7:30; while they told others it began at 7:00. By the time the former arrived, almost all the food was gone, and, as the Apostle noted, some people were sitting in the corner, tanked up with wine.

Paul was amazed that certain individuals didn’t recognize the Body of Christ in the poor, something he claimed made them unworthy to receive the Eucharist. If the Eucharist is where “you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes,” then the Eucharist is also where you die by surfacing the risen Jesus in everyone, including the poor.

Notice in today’s Eucharistic gospel that Jesus doesn’t actually feed the crowd; his disciples take care of that. His role is just to get them to share what little they have with everyone else. He only blesses their meager fare, then gives it back to them to distribute to the crowd. Luke, along with Mark and Matthew, was convinced the Lord’s Supper was the unique place to share ourselves with others. No one is excused simply because “I don’t bring anything.” Our evangelists were convinced everyone had something to give. And since that something was blessed by Jesus, it could more than take care of the needs of the people around them.

Since, as Jungmann showed, the Lord’s Supper eventually devolved into just a one man show, it’s hard to find areas in which we can give ourselves. There’s no more pot luck meal, no more shared homilies. Perhaps the only way we can do so today is to be totally open to everyone who celebrates with us. If we don’t die enough to ourselves to recognize the risen Jesus in each of them, neither – according to Paul - will we be able to recognize him/her as present in the bread and wine.

JUNE 5TH, 2016: TENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
I Kings 17:17-24 Galatians 1:11-19 Luke 7:11-17

Though we have four biblical accounts of Paul's conversion, today's Galatians pericope contains the only one actually written by Paul himself. The other three - sometimes contradictory - accounts in Acts were all composed by Luke.

Like almost all Scripture, this Galatians passage is triggered by problems. The reason the Apostle recalls the event is because some in the Christian community were questioning his work with Gentiles. They didn't object to his converting non-Jews to the faith of Jesus as long as he first converted them to Judaism, something Paul not only thought unnecessary, but also - as we'll see in a couple of weeks - totally against basic faith in the risen Jesus, who isn't a Jew or a Gentile.

What's interesting is that Paul is convinced his call to evangelize Gentiles came as an essential part of his encounter with the risen Jesus years before on the road to Damascus. He isn't downplaying the historical Jesus' Jewishness because, as some of his critics claimed, he'd been a "bad" Jew himself. On the contrary, he's able to boast, "I (once) persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it." He's the most unlikely person to hold the opinions he now holds. At one point in his life he could have been regarded as a "super Jew." "(I) progressed in Judaism," he writes, "beyond many of my contemporaries among my race, since I was even more a zealot for my ancestral traditions;" the very traditions he's now claiming Gentile Christians don't have to keep.

Paul answers his critics' objection that he hasn't received permission from the church's leaders to do what he's doing in two ways. First, he doesn't need their permission. He received his Gentile ministry directly from the risen Jesus. Second, he eventually did check with the Jerusalem leaders, and they had no objections to how he was evangelizing Gentiles.

Though we're not certain what exactly happened on the road to Damascus, whatever Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus consisted in, it not only changed his life, it created a whole new life for him. He began to live something he never lived before. His entire value system was turned upside down.

No wonder Jesus' followers enjoyed narrating stories of Jesus resuscitating people from the dead. In some sense they were narrating stories which described their own experiences.

The gospel resuscitation stories differ from the narrative of Elijah resuscitating the widow of Zarephath's son in our I Kings reading. Probably none of the sacred author's readers identified with the boy the prophet brought back to life. This event was simply proof the word Elijah proclaimed was actually Yahweh's word.

But when the gospel Jesus resuscitates Lazarus, Jairus' daughter and the widow of Nain's son, the readers, because of their own experiences of coming to life in Jesus, logically zero in on the resuscitated persons. They, like the chosen three, have also been brought back to life.

Back in the 70s, when Ray Moody and Elizabeth Kübler Ross studied people who had died and been resuscitated, they discovered that the life these people received was somewhat different from the lives they lived before. For instance, they were more interested in relating to others than they had been before their deaths. Paul certainly demonstrated that dimension in his unexpected relating to Gentiles, a people he seems to have just tolerated before his life-giving encounter with the risen Jesus.

But these resuscitated individuals also shared another characteristic: they no longer had any fear of dying. In some sense, they'd already been there and done that.

Perhaps some of our fear of dying comes from our lack of dying as other Christs right here and now.

