

OCTOBER 16TH, 2016: TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Exodus 17:8-13 II Timothy 3:14-4:2 Luke 18:1-8

We have to be careful how we interpret today's Exodus reading. One of my Catholic grade school teachers once encouraged us to pray with upraised hands, like Moses, if we wanted to make certain God would hear our prayers and grant our requests.

I'm afraid that teacher never heard of ancient "fertility cults." The biblical prophets certainly did; they constantly warned their people against employing such religious practices. One of my Scripture profs once defined fertility cults as simple answers to complicated questions, comparing them to modern TV commercials. Having trouble getting a date? Just change your toothpaste! Is your life boring? You're probably driving the wrong car!

The goal of fertility cults is simple: if you use special words or employ special actions the proper amount to times, you can tie God's hands behind God's back. He's forced to give you whatever you ask, even if he doesn't want to. God has no choice. It's akin to holding a piece of kryptonite in front of Superman.

That's why biblical Jews were forbidden to do anything that even smacked of fertility cults: to plow a field with a donkey and ox yoked together, wear garments made from two different kinds of material, or even boil a kid goat to death in its mother's milk. The prophets were convinced that no one should engage in any rituals which attempted to control Yahweh's actions in their lives. The Chosen People were expected to relate to their God, not control God.

Though Scripture scholars can't agree on the meaning of Moses' raised hands in our first reading, they're certain his gestures have nothing to do with controlling Yahweh's actions during the battle.

Luke's Jesus enters the fertility cult fray by insisting that those who have a proper relationship with God shouldn't have to worry about using gimmicks to have their prayers answered. God isn't a judge who will cave in under pressure. On the contrary, God is always interested in "securing the rights of his/her chosen ones." The question doesn't revolve around God's response to our prayers. It's about the frame of mind with which we say those prayers. "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Serious students of Scripture couldn't agree more with the emphasis put on the importance of Scripture in today's II Timothy pericope. The unknown author is certain "all Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work." Of course, the author is referring only to the Hebrew Scriptures. (The Christian Scriptures wouldn't be regarded as "inspired" for another 150 years!) And she/he is certainly not thinking about using those writings just as a source of "proof texts." The sacred writer obviously wants us to imitate the faith of those who composed them. Their faith is the word we should be "proclaiming, whether convenient or inconvenient."

I've discovered after almost 50 years of teaching Scripture that such a proclamation is often "inconvenient" in a church which has traditionally emphasized its own fertility cults. As a child, I used to worry about my non-Catholic cousins' eternal salvation. They knew nothing about receiving communion on nine straight First Fridays, making novenas to the Blessed Virgin, or the requirements for gaining plenary indulgences.

My mother once received a prayer card from a well-meaning friend. The novena to St. Joseph which it touted came with a warning: "You had better want what you're praying for to St. Joseph. You're going to receive it whether you want it or not."

We Catholics obviously are notorious for cornering the kryptonite market.

OCTOBER 23RD, 2016: THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18 II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 Luke 18:9-14

Last week's readings zeroed in on the relationship expected of all people of faith with God. A life based on faith demands we relate with God, not try to control him/her. Today's gospel passage outlines the first step in building and maintaining such a relationship: honesty.

No two people could be further apart on a 1st century CE Palestinian religious scale than a Pharisee and a tax collector. The former was akin to a "super-Jew," spending his life studying, teaching and keeping the 613 Laws of Moses. Everything he did revolved around those Sinai regulations. Scanning his temple competition, he could logically say, "I'm not like the rest of humanity – greedy, dishonest, adulterous – or even like this tax collector."

The latter, on the other hand, really didn't give much thought to those Mosaic precepts. As a collector of taxes, he centered his life on a different value system. He would have daily done things forbidden to mainstream Jews. The money he so faithfully amassed went not to his fellow Jews, but to his country's enemies: the Romans. A traitor to his people, he helped keep their oppressors in power. And he usually acquired those taxes by "immoral" means: extortion, blackmail and strong arm tactics. He not only was hated by everyone, but because of his profession, he constantly was at odds with the very regulations the Pharisee esteemed. Though tax collectors weren't forbidden under pain of death, like Samaritans, to enter the temple precincts, his presence in that sacred space would have surprised other worshippers. "What's someone like that doing in a place like this? There goes the neighborhood!"

Yet Jesus praises this religious scoundrel at the same time he brushes aside the religious perfectionist. Out of the two, the tax collector alone leaves "justified:" doing what Yahweh wants him to do, simply being honest about himself. His only prayer is, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner." Unlike the Pharisee he doesn't compare himself with anyone else. He just zeros in on his own moral condition.

If all valid relationships revolve around giving ourselves to others, they can only work when we begin the process by being honest about who it is who's actually doing the giving. Yet we "fake it" so often during our encounters with others, that we also fall into that same trap when we're really trying to build relationships with significant others. Luke's Jesus reminds us that faking it with God in a no-no. God simply expects us to tell him/her who we really are. That's a given.

Sirach, in our first reading, encourages us not to worry: God treats everyone with total impartiality. Yahweh is a God of justice: a God of relationships. He/she gives everyone an even break. If our relationship isn't working, it can only be because we're holding back from giving our true selves to God, often because of something embarrassing in that true self.

The unknown author of II Timothy has no problem conveying his insights into Paul's personality, even when they suggest some of the Apostle's weaknesses. Though he's writing about a larger than life figure, he doesn't hesitate to get down to the nitty gritty. Paul certainly wasn't the kind of individual who appealed to everyone. "At my first defense no one appeared on my behalf, but everyone deserted me." Some of us would also pause before stepping forward to defend such a radical person of faith. Paul wasn't perfect.

Perhaps that's why he, like us, constantly falls back on his relationship with the risen Jesus: the one person who presumes we're not perfect, and is grateful whenever we admit it.