

JANUARY 8TH, 2017: EPIPHANY OF THE CHRIST
Isaiah 60:1-6 Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6 Matthew 2:1-12

The future rarely turns out the way we plan it. This is especially true with Jewish expectations of the Messiah. Years ago, the late Raymond Brown remarked in one of our diocesan clergy conferences that the Messiah 1st century CE Jews were expecting has yet to come. “Jesus of Nazareth was not that Messiah.”

Many Christians think the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures had just one task: to foretell the coming of Jesus as Messiah. They overlook the fact that scholars tell us biblical concepts of the Messiah varied according to the peoples’ needs in the day and age in which the various authors wrote. Messianic predictions, for instance, in 9th century BC Israel were quite different from those in the 6th century. Over the centuries the Chosen People went from presuming one of their next kings would be the Messiah to believing Yahweh would eventually send just one non-royal, unique individual to fill that role.

Since Rome occupied Palestine during Jesus’ historical ministry, most Jews were convinced God would send a military Messiah who would throw the foreigners out. In the first third of the 1st century, pious Israelites were expecting the epiphany – the public “coming out” – of that kind of savior. For most, the biblical Jesus’ epiphany as the Christ (the Messiah) was a total surprise.

As we hear in today’s Third-Isaiah reading, there always was hope in Judaism that Gentiles would eventually “gather and come” to Israel in ways that would enrich the country and its people. “. . . The riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you, the wealth of nations shall be brought to you.” Many even believed that besides “bearing gold and frankincense,” these non-Jews would also proclaim “the praises of Yahweh.” In other words, they’d actually convert to Judaism.

No Jew would object to their anticipated Messiah bringing Gentiles “into the fold.” The main problem they encountered with Jesus of Nazareth revolved around some of his followers bringing these Gentiles into their faith communities without first converting them to Judaism. The Pauline disciple responsible for the letter to the Ephesians succinctly states this “heretical” belief. “. . . Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” This certainly wouldn’t be the teaching of the Christ whom the vast majority of Jews were expecting.

That seems to be one of the reasons Matthew, writing for a Jewish-Christian community, includes the story of the magi. Throughout his gospel he brings up instances in which non-Jews are better at living the faith of Jesus than Jews. Nowhere is this more sharply demonstrated at the beginning of Jesus’ life than having not just Gentiles, but Gentile astrologers travel hundreds of miles “to do homage to the newborn king of the Jews,” while Herod, the Jew, refuses to go the few miles between Jerusalem and Bethlehem to even check on the accuracy of biblical prophecies about the Messiah’s birth.

Yet perhaps the strongest drawback to wide acceptance of Jesus as Messiah is contained in one small addition Matthew makes to Third-Isaiah’s Gentile gift list. Besides gold and frankincense, the magi also bring myrrh. The late Dr. Irvin Arkin once asked, “How would you feel if someone gave you a bottle of embalming fluid as a birthday gift?” At the time of Jesus, myrrh was normally used to anoint dead bodies before they were entombed or buried.

Even in this glorious epiphany event, Matthew reminds his readers that if they accept Jesus as Messiah, they’re also accepting their responsibility to suffer and die with him. You don’t have to be Jewish to have problems with the epiphany of that kind of Messiah.

JANUARY 15TH, 2017: SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 49:3, 5-6 I Corinthians 1:1-3 Matthew 1:29-34

I presume Scripture scholars didn't choose our liturgical readings. If they did, there's no way the most important verse of today's first reading would have been left out.

This second song of Deutero-Isaiah's suffering servant revolves around his belief that he's totally failed as Yahweh's prophet. Immediately after God assures him, "You are my servant through whom I show my glory," Deutero-Isaiah shakes his head and (in the omitted verse) says, ". . . I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength." In other words, "How could I have shown your glory when I screwed up the only ministry you gave me?" There's no deeper mystery in all of Scripture. God's actually held in higher esteem when we fail, not when we succeed.

Not only that, but our failures lead God to expand our God-given work, not decrease it. "It is too little," Yahweh tells the prophet, "for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." Instead of just proclaiming God's word to Jews, now Deutero-Isaiah will proclaim it to every person on the face of this planet.

Though as Christians we believe the risen Jesus shares his/her ministry with every disciple, none of us can be certain about the limits of that ministry. In some sense, that ministry is always in flux, it never stays the same. Not only Deutero-Isaiah, but also Paul of Tarsus provides us with an example of a mobile ministry.

Originally biblical followers of Jesus were divided into three categories. A "disciple" was anyone committed to carrying out Jesus' message and lifestyle. An "apostle," a disciple called to go out on a special, specific ministry – like the "72" in the Synoptic gospels. The "twelve," a group of apostles who frequently accompany the historical Jesus on his itinerant preaching trips. Membership in the twelve could change, but always had to be twelve to symbolize Israel's twelve tribes: among other things, an outward sign Jesus was directing his reform to all Jews, not just to a couple of tribes. Sadly, Luke is the one who confuses the terminology by employing the now-familiar phrase the "twelve apostles."

Paul wrote I Corinthians more than 25 years before Luke wrote his gospel. So when in today's second reading he calls himself "an apostle of Christ Jesus" we presume he's simply saying the risen Jesus set him aside for a special ministry, not that he's one of the twelve. And because biblical "call narratives" were composed long after the original event, we also presume the details of that ministry weren't outlined the instant he felt called. That his ministry would eventually revolve around evangelizing non-Jews probably didn't occur to him until long after he sensed he had an apostolic call. As we see in Acts, he first tried to proclaim the faith to Jews in synagogues, failed and only then turned to Gentiles.

Parallel things can be said about John the Baptizer. It's one thing for Matthew, a Christian author writing almost 50 years after John's martyrdom, to label this wilderness prophet Jesus' precursor, it's a totally other thing to surface what the historical John thought of himself and his failed ministry. Today the vast majority of scholars agree the coming of Jesus as such played no part in his preaching.

All these biblical failures force each of us to examine our own lives and the callings we've received. Have we ignored other callings from the risen Jesus simply because we somehow screwed up past ones?