

FEBRUARY 5TH, 2017: FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 58:7-10 I Corinthians 2:1-5 Matthew 5:13-16

Long before 1624, when John Donne penned the famous line “No man is an island,” our sacred authors were convinced of the truth of that statement. They believed each of our lives inevitably affects the lives – for good or bad – of the people around us.

This certainly is true of the Hebrew prophets. Once we eradicate the false idea that they were mainly concerned with predicting the coming of Jesus and concentrate on their actual messages, their emphasis on creating life-giving relationships becomes embarrassingly evident. Today’s Third-Isaiah pericope provides us with a classic example.

Though this particular prophet is deeply committed to convincing the recently freed Babylonian captives to return to the Promised Land and rebuild Jerusalem, he never lets his people forget what they should be doing in the meantime. Whether they’re living in one of the Babylonian suburbs or in downtown Jerusalem, they’re to “share their bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless; clothe the naked . . . and not turn their backs on their own.” In other words, their lives should make a positive difference in other peoples’ lives.

One of the most interesting facets of this unnamed prophet’s theology is his belief that many of our personal problems would disappear if we were more concerned with helping others get rid of their problems. “If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech;” he proclaims, “if you bestow your bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted; then light shall rise for you in the darkness, and the gloom shall become for you like midday.”

Today’s gospel passages carry more of an impact when we remember that Matthew positions it at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount – immediately after the Beatitudes. He’s obviously concerned that his readers appreciate not only how the unique behavior which Jesus demands of them will change their lives, but will also change the lives of those who aren’t his followers. “You are the salt of the earth . . . a city set on a mountain,” Matthew’s Jesus reminds his followers. “No one lights a lamp, then puts it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others”

We who follow Jesus are responsible for letting others see that “in can be done:” that people can actually imitate Jesus in their daily lives. If we don’t carry through on the morality he taught and lived, his ideals remain just pie in the sky, something no one would ever dare integrate into how they lived their lives.

After reading the Sermon on the Mount, we might beg off carrying it out because we’re either not strong enough to follow through on how Jesus expects us to relate to others, or we’re too weak to put up with the static which will come our way if we actually try to do so. But in either case, Paul beats us to the punch.

In some sense, the Apostle tells his Corinthian community that if he can do it, anyone can do it. He certainly didn’t talk any one of them into becoming a Christian. He didn’t have the ability to do so. He could zero in on Jesus’ weakness by simply pointing to his own weakness. The only way he was able to make Jesus’ morality his morality was to totally give himself over to the risen Jesus, and let him/her work through him.

Perhaps one of the most important lines in Scripture is Paul’s admission that living his faith doesn’t depend on his own power, but on the “power of God” working through him.

FEBRUARY 12TH, 2017: SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Sirach 15:15-20 I Corinthians 2:6-10 Matthew 5:17-37

It's clear from various parts of the Christian Scriptures that one of the main reasons people originally began to imitate Jesus' dying and rising was that it gave them a freedom they'd never before experienced.

Psychologists and psychiatrists frequently remind us that, on any given day, we rarely do anything which is totally free. Most of our actions – even our “religious” actions - are simply habitual, or performed either because we're afraid of the consequences of doing the opposite, or because we want to maintain an image of ourselves which we've cultivated over the years. They're far from being free.

But such freedom didn't begin with Christianity. At least two centuries before Jesus' birth, the author of Sirach reminded his readers that their Jewish faith revolves around making free choices. “God has set before us,” he writes, “fire and water . . . life and death, good and evil, whatever we choose shall be given us.” We have at least some control over our lives.

It's important to remember that when Sirach originally penned these words about choice, he had no concept of an afterlife as we have today. The “life” he expected his readers to choose wasn't an eternal life in heaven; it was a “new and improved” life right here and now. Our earthly lives will become fulfilled and meaningful only if we make the choices Yahweh expects and wants us to make.

Yet, as Paul reminds his Corinthian community, it isn't the easiest thing in the world to find out what God really wants us to do. Obviously not everyone who claims to know God's mind actually knows it. According to the Apostle, the “rulers of this age” certainly have no inkling of God's will. Unlike the risen Jesus, they're leading us away, not toward God's “mysterious, hidden wisdom.” That's why it's essential for other Christs to have Jesus' Spirit. His Spirit alone makes our mind one with God's mind, leading us to look at everyone and everything around us from a unique perspective – God's perspective.

Matthew is dealing with a community which, as Jews, believed they understood God's mind long before they came in contact with Jesus. But that encounter turned everything upside down. That seems to be behind Jesus' assurance, “I have come not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets.” There was nothing wrong with what they did before; Jesus is simply taking them to a new level. He's concerned not with the afterlife, but with the here and now of entering “the kingdom of heaven:” of experiencing God working effectively in their daily, humdrum lives. To pull that off they have to freely choose to go beyond the 613 Laws of Moses.

When Matthew's Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said . . . ,” he's quoting one of those covenant regulations. But in each case, he takes his followers beyond the usual interpretation of that particular regulation, giving it a new meaning, one that surpasses the “righteousness” of even those “super-Jews:” the scribes and Pharisees. His disciples, for instance, are not only to avoid physical murder, they're to renounce even the psychological murder of someone that comes from verbally abusing them.

Modern moral theologians often remind us that God will eventually judge us only on the things we freely chose to do. Whatever we did out of force or fear – like going to Mass on Sunday because our parents gave us no other choice – will play no role in our eternal future. The historical (and risen) Jesus certainly wants us to make free choices, choices which will not only get us into heaven one day, but will even now enable us to experience the heaven that's already around us.