

APRIL 2ND, 2017, FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Ezekiel 37:12-14 Romans 8:8-11 John 11:1-45

A critical reading of Scripture shows us that we profess a constantly evolving faith. It's always on the move. Just when we think we've nailed it down, we read the next author and discover it's shifted once again. Because our sacred authors are committed to sharing their ever-changing insights with us, we have no choice but to accompany them on their unique faith journey. Nowhere is this movement clearer than in today's well-known gospel pericope.

Though I learned very early in my grade school religion classes what exactly was going to happen to me when I took my last mortal breath, our Christian sacred authors never attended those classes. We know from I Thessalonians 4 - the earliest Christian writing we possess – that Paul thought Christians who had the misfortune to die before Jesus' Second Coming would simply have to spend time in their graves awaiting that event. They would rise only when he/she returned.

The first two evangelists – Mark and Matthew – never say anything which would contradict Paul's theology. But by the mid-80s when Luke writes his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, faith in the risen Jesus' imminent return is beginning to wane. We hear in Luke's narrative of Stephen's martyrdom that Jesus comes for him at the moment of death; he doesn't have to wait for the Parousia to have that glorious experience. In some sense, Christians can now expect to have their "personal Parousia" when they die.

John takes Luke's theology one step further when he writes his gospel in the mid-90s. He uses Jesus' raising of Lazarus as the vehicle to convey it. In her conversation with Jesus, Mary gives the "old" theology. "I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day." John's Jesus then provides us with the "new and improved" theology: "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

All who study John know about his knack for pushing "realized eschatology." In other words, what we expect to happen only at the end of time – the "eschaton" – John presumes is already happening right here and now. In regards to the afterlife, he's convinced such an existence is already part of our lives even before we breathe our last. In this particular passage, he demonstrates his belief with a sign: Lazarus is alive though he physically died.

Our sacred authors have come a long way from the 6th century BCE days of Ezekiel when there was no belief in an afterlife as we know it. For Yahweh to return all the exiled Chosen People to the Promised Land, he'll have to actually open up some graves, pull them out and bring them back. But this will be a unique resuscitation; only these particular Jews will experience it. Everyone else's life will still definitely end with their physical deaths.

Yet even after Jesus' death and resurrection, now that all people have a chance to achieve eternal life, we're still not 100% certain in what that life consists. Paul can assure the church in Rome, ". . . The one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit dwelling in you." But we know from his I Thessalonians theology that, unlike Luke and John, he doesn't expect that life to begin until after the Parousia.

Knowing the biblical history revolving around faith in an afterlife, why would we believe that John has provided us with the last word on the subject? Presuming the topic is still evolving, this is one case in which we can validly ask, "What do you think?"

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APRIL 9TH, 2017: PALM SUNDAY
Isaiah 50:4-7 Philippians 2:6-11 Matthew 26:14-27:66

Though I enjoyed reading Dava Sobel's best-selling book Galileo's Daughter, I was deeply disturbed by what happened in the early life of the title character: Galileo's oldest child, Virginia. Because she and her younger sister, Livia, were "illegitimate," their father felt forced to put them – for the rest of their lives - into a cloistered convent when they were only twelve and thirteen years old. He reasoned, because of the circumstances of their birth, they'd have almost no chance of ever being married. The renowned scientist's early 17th century Italian culture simply took such disturbing actions for granted. That's just the way it was back then.

People rarely dare to question the restrictions culture impose on them. We often put them on the same level as "divine commands." That seems to be one of the reasons Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. This upstart first century CE itinerant preacher actually expected people to change their culture. We especially see him carrying out this demand in the event we commemorate today.

Jewish culture in this former carpenter's day and age expected the Messiah to be someone who would deliver the Chosen People from Rome's 90-year occupation of their country. To fulfill his mission, Yahweh's anointed one would have to be a military leader, a person who could lead others into battle against Israel's formidable foe. Among other things, such a person would logically ride a horse: a military weapon.

When Jesus comes into Jerusalem on this day, people simultaneously would have heard good news and bad news. The good news: the Messiah has finally arrived! The bad news: he's riding a donkey! He seems to have deliberately chosen this humble mode of transportation to challenge his Jewish culture's long standing concepts of Messiah. If Jesus is the Messiah, he's certainly not the Messiah his fellow Jews are expecting.

It appears the gospel Jesus is deeply committed not just to changing our personal morality, but also in changing the culture within which we live that morality. He perfectly embodies the Scriptural definition of the ideal follower of Yahweh contained in our first reading. "Morning after morning," Deutero-Isaiah tells us, "Yahweh opens my ear that I may hear." True disciples aren't content just to follow religious rules and regulations. They listen to what God and God's Spirit is encouraging them to do. They're convinced that they're being daily called to hear a gentle, disturbing voice leading them to go beyond rules and regulations, a voice constantly demanding they challenge even their culture.

Of course, as Paul reminds the Philippians community in today's second reading, they're to hear this voice in the midst of imitating Jesus' emptying himself for others. It's only in the middle of such unselfish giving that the Spirit's voice becomes clearer and louder, and the consequences of carrying out the demands of that voice become more painful. We only have to listen to Matthew's Passion Narrative to discover the latter.

As with all gospel Passion Narratives, Matthew mentions practically nothing about Jesus' physical suffering. (He doesn't even say Jesus was *nailed* to the cross.) He's much more interested in his psychological suffering and pain. His Jesus is misunderstood, rejected, and deserted by those for whom he gives himself.

Matthew knew practically no one in his Jewish/Christian community would ever be called upon to physically suffer as the historical Jesus suffered. But all of them would be expected to identify with his psychological suffering, something which always happens when people empty themselves for others.

Fortunately in our current culture "illegitimate" girls no longer have to worry about being sent to a cloistered convent. But who else is being hurt today? Perhaps all of us should be listening more intently to the real "listeners."

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