

## SEPTEMBER 9<sup>TH</sup>, 2018: TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 35:4-7a James 2:1-5 Mark 7:31-37

Counter to popular wisdom, gospel miracles aren't supposed to prove Jesus is God; the evangelists provided them to us to convince us what *kind* of a God he is. If the communities for whom the gospels were originally written weren't already convinced this unique Palestinian carpenter was God, they wouldn't be reading the gospels in the first place. Just because someone believes in God, he or she might not believe in the kind of God the gospel Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed. There are all sorts of images of God.

For instance, during the movie *Silver Linings Playbook* the Bradley Cooper character throws his copy of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* through his closed bedroom window, abruptly waking up his parents and the neighbors in the middle of the night. Like so many other people reaching the end of this famous book, Cooper doesn't agree with the vengeful, destructive concept of God Hemingway provides. He wasn't expecting that kind of ending based on the God he'd heard preached in church.

This "God-imagining" thing goes beyond gospels. First-Isaiah engages in it in today's first reading. Unlike Jeremiah, who at one point refers to Yahweh as a wadi – a dangerous, undependable stream of water – Isaiah has only good things to say about God in this passage. She/he vindicates our cause, offers salvation, gives sight to the blind, ears to the deaf, new legs to the lame and provides us with constant, life-giving water. Certainly a person you'd always like to have around.

Mark's Jesus continues with part of that imagery in our gospel pericope by restoring sound and speech to the handicapped man he encounters "in the district of the Decapolis." Notice how often all the evangelists paint a picture of Jesus curing a deaf or blind person. They seem to revel in reminding their readers that they follow a Jesus who helps us see and hear things which others never notice. For people of faith, seeing and hearing is now on a different level.

This is especially the case in our James passage. The author demands we look at the poor through the eyes of the person we're trying to imitate. No longer do we notice just a person "in shabby clothes." We now see someone "rich in faith and an heir of the kingdom." Though we normally zero in on a rich person's "gold rings and fine clothes," and give him/her a place of honor at the community's gatherings, people of faith no longer classify people based on those distinctions.

This reminds me of a well-known Thomas Merton quote I recently posted on my Facebook page: "Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy." After reading it, one of my "friends" reminded me that Pope Francis has said something similar. "When we encounter a beggar, it's our place to give generously; it's their place to spend it wisely."

Whether we like to admit it or not, in the gospels we encounter a God in Jesus of Nazareth who often reminded his followers that the God he follows causes it to rain on good people and bad people alike. If we had our druthers, we'd most probably reward the good and punish the bad. Why should we give bad people good things?

It takes Christians like Francis, Merton and James to remind us that we often find a different image of God in the book we employ during our liturgies. If we weren't taught in our grade school catechism classes that "desecrating" holy objects is a sacrilege, I presume a lot of our homes would have battered bibles in their front yards, and broken windows in their upstairs bedrooms. Maybe Bradley Cooper wasn't that far off.

## SEPTEMBER 16<sup>TH</sup>, 2018: TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 50:5-9a James 2:14-18 Mark 8:27-35

Christianity is a rather simple-to-understand faith: If you die with Christ, you rise with Christ. The problem comes in the definition of terms – especially what it means to die with Christ.

Obviously our faith doesn't demand we actually take off our clothes, lie down on a crucifix and have nails pounded in our wrists and feet. Though the historical Jesus actually died in that way, his followers were never expected to precisely imitate that event. Our dying with him is on a different level. That's why our first evangelist – Mark – makes certain his readers know what the gospel Jesus means by “dying with him.”

Three times – in chapters 8, 9, and 10 – Mark's Jesus predicts his passion, death and resurrection. After each prediction, one or more of his disciples say or do something showing they have no idea what it means to die with him. Finally, Jesus clarifies the situation, teaching Mark's readers three different lessons on dying.

Today's gospel pericope, after Jesus' question about who he is, presents us with the first of those predictions. Peter's given the honor of initially “screwing up the works,” earning Jesus' well-known, dreaded command, “Get behind me, Satan.” The leader of the Twelve has no idea why dying with Jesus is necessary. Simon, and those who think like him, are obstacles to Jesus' dying/rising life and ministry.

But how does someone actually die? By denying themselves, taking up their “cross” and following Jesus.

Of course, carrying one's cross wouldn't have made sense until after Jesus' resurrection. That's why scholars believe the historical Jesus most probably encouraged his followers to carry their “tau.” The tau – a T – isn't just the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, it's also used to symbolize “totality.” Similar to our expression “from A to Z.” (Only for them it would be from aleph to tau.) “Doing something to the tau” implies doing the whole thing. At the time of Jesus, some holy, pious Jews would actually wear a tau on their clothes, or tattoo one on their hand as a sign they were totally dedicated to carrying out Yahweh's will. (Francis of Assisi knew this, prompting him to frequently use taus. Taus are now found in many Franciscan coats of arms.)

In today's gospel narrative, Mark is telling his community that the first way another Christ dies is to be totally open to whatever God wants him or her to do. Ironically for the historical Jesus, part of his personal tau consisted in his accepting the cross. No wonder the evangelist could replace tau with cross when Jesus was in the picture. Yet carrying one's tau is much broader than just one unpleasant thing we're expected to endure.

Deutero-Isaiah's tau, for instance, includes the physical suffering he refers to in our first reading. But even before that suffering happens, he mentions that Yahweh opens his ear every morning to hear what he/she's got in store for him during that particular day. Unless he's a good “listener,” he'll never die enough to know how he's part of Yahweh's plan.

James couldn't agree more. Fed up with Christians who do nothing but boast about the depth of their faith in Jesus, he demands to know where “the beef” is. Only when we get involved in supplying the concrete “necessities of the body” for those in need do we start dying. Takes a lot of listening and tau-carrying to reach that point.

Obviously some followers of Jesus hear only the rising part of their dying/rising experience of the risen Jesus. Mark continues to be convinced we concentrate on the dying aspect for a little while longer.

Tune in next week for the second way to die. It's guaranteed to get even more complicated.

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