

NOVEMBER 7, 2010: THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR II Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14 II Thessalonians 2:16-3:5 Luke 20:27-38

St. Louis University Scripture prof Frank Cleary once remarked that today's gospel pericope contains the only biblical mention of Jesus confronting the religious conservatives of his day and age: the Sadducees. Frank contends the historical Jesus seems to have written off those whose faith revolved around the "old time religion." As an itinerant preacher, the Capernaum carpenter refused to get involved in religious nostalgia.

Jesus was a Pharisee. He belonged to a movement rooted in the 6th century BCE Babylonian Exile. For more than 50 years, Jews living away from the Holy Land couldn't take part in Temple worship - a mainstay of Jewish belief and practice. (Of course, even those Jews still living in downtown Jerusalem at this time couldn't take part in such services. The Babylonians had wiped the temple off the face of the earth in 586.)

During this "no-temple" interval, some pious, exiled Jews began to meet regularly to read, study and comment on the 613 laws of Moses. Even if they couldn't practice their faith in a traditional temple-oriented way, they could still follow and adapt Yahweh's laws in a new, foreign environment. (The places in which they met would eventually be called synagogues.) The movement these religious progressives began would later be a God-send to Jews between 70 and 1967 CE when the temple area was not in Jewish control.

This tendency to concentrate on the Mosaic Law still continued even after the Babylonian-conquering Persians permitted exiled Jews to return to the Holy Land in the 530s, eventually developing into Phariseism by the time of Jesus' ministry. Those who were counted among their number a century before Jesus' birth not only stressed the development and adaptation of their laws, but also developed a belief in an afterlife.

Jesus certainly had problems with some of the tenets of his fellow Pharisees - especially their tendency to often regard laws to be more important than people. But he seems to have discovered that their progressive frame of mind made many of them receptive to the message he preached. (Notice how often our evangelists mention Jesus preaching in synagogues.)

On the other hand, Sadducees were grounded in the good old days. They refused to accept any books in their Bible except the first five: the Torah. And since there's no mention of an afterlife as we know it in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, they didn't believe in it. Led by the temple priests, these arch-conservatives would never agree with the faith proclaimed by the seven martyred brothers in our Maccabees reading. ". . . The King of the world will raise us up to live again forever."

From the answers Luke's Jesus gives the Sadducees in today's gospel pericope, it's clear he's asking them to take their faith beyond the way things are here and now, to conceive of a different world, an existence in which humans "neither marry nor are given in marriage." He expects his disciples to have the same evolving faith.

Jesus and his followers relate to a God who, not a God who was. This seems to be why he brings up the burning bush narrative in which Yahweh proclaims, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Though these three patriarchs had died more than 500 years before Moses' Sinai experience, they're still alive.

Precisely because Christians have committed themselves to relate to a God who is constantly doing new things in their lives, we must follow the advice of the author of II Thessalonians to trust a God who "encourages your hearts and strengthens them in every good deed and word."

As a pastor, I envy the historical Jesus. Most of the time he could pick his audiences. He didn't minister to a parish made up of progressives and conservatives. But it's a big support to my progressive psyche to remember which group accepted Jesus' faith and which group rejected it, and why.

Roger Vermalen Karban

This commentary is provided by the FAITHFUL OF SOUTHERN ILLINOIS. Please share it with a friend. We appreciate your comments and donations.
FOSIL, BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

NOVEMBER 14, 2010: TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Malachi 3:19-20a II Thessalonians 3:7-12 Luke 21:5-19

I'm grateful to Dominic Crossan for pointing out something I'd never noticed. In his book *God and Empire*, he shows how the Book of Revelation differs from the apocalyptic sections of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, especially when it comes to the "end of the world." Familiar with C.S. Lewis' *Tales of Narnia*, and the *Left Behind* series, most of us picture a vengeful, destructive God finally "setting things straight" on earth. On that fateful day, and in periods leading up to it, God will punish all evil doers with great calamities. (Think of the four horsemen, not of Notre Dame, but of the Apocalypse.) When this horrible earth and its horrible inhabitants are finally decimated, God and Jesus will welcome the just into the realm of eternal, heavenly joy.

In all the Christian Scriptures, we find such a vindictive divine personality only in the book of Revelation. In today's Lucan pericope Jesus certainly talks about "things (which) are about to happen," and mentions "wars and insurrections," warning that "nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom." He tells us that we'll have to endure "powerful earthquakes, famine and plagues," and experience "awesome sights and mighty signs (coming) from the sky." But for Luke these happenings are to be looked upon as "natural" phenomena. Never does his Jesus say these are how God inflicts God's wrath on a sinful earth. Christians are not to think these happening are prerequisites for Jesus' arrival. They're simply things that occur in the course of our existence, not signs of Jesus' imminent return.

According to Luke, his readers must be prepared to live their normal lives until their natural deaths without expecting Jesus' Parousia to interrupt that process.

Luke's theology directs his readers' eyes from heaven (from whence Jesus will come) to the everyday people and events of life (in which the risen Jesus is already present.) Here, right now, disciples of Jesus should be able to discover and surface his/her presence, even in the middle of persecution.

The author of II Thessalonians, writing at least a generation after Paul's death, seems to buy into the same theology. Though his mentor, Paul, expected Jesus' return in his lifetime, today's writer mentions nothing of that belief in this passage. Instead, he or she zeroes in on the most down to earth happenings in the community. Addressing readers in the "person" of Paul, the author reminds them that the Apostle was no slouch. Even while evangelizing others, he constantly worked for his room and board - unlike those free-loaders in earshot of this original letter. Others, because of the free time their refusal to work provides, are "conducting themselves... in a disorderly way, by not keeping busy but minding the business of others." The things which people are concerned with right here and now are far more important than wasting time in futile attempts to pinpoint the exact time and place of the Parousia.

Malachi seems, at first glance, to be more at home with the book of Revelation than with Luke or the II Thessalonians author. He speaks about the "proud and evildoers" being burned into stubble. Yet, we must remember that when the prophet was active, there still was no concept of an afterlife as we know it today. Malachi seems to presume that the same sun which is a problem for proud evildoers will be a blessing for those who "fear (Yahweh's) name." The latter will experience it as a "sun of justice with... healing rays." What some judge to be a curse, others receive as a blessing.

No one knows why Jesus' Second Coming still lies in the future. We can only be certain that the time we're allotted before that glorious day should be a period in which we imitate the non-vindictive historical Jesus, even on those occasions when we're tempted to put the book of Revelation at the top of our reading list.

This commentary is provided by the FAITHFUL OF SOUTHERN ILLINOIS.
Please share it with a friend. We appreciate your comments and donations.
FOSIL, BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222