

NOVEMBER 21, 2010: CHRIST THE KING
II Samuel 5:1-3 Colossians 1:12-20 Luke 23:35-43

Today's first reading narrates one of the most important events in Jewish history. I always insist my students know the year it happened - the easiest date in all Scripture to remember: 1,000 BCE. Before "all the tribes of Israel came to David in Hebron," Jews were divided into two tribal confederations: Israel in the North, Judah in the South.

Until the northern tribes met with David in Hebron, he was only ruler of the South. But once they "anointed him king of Israel," he became ruler of a united Jewish nation, eventually leading up to "the glory" his son Solomon enjoyed. His Hebron anointing ushered in the most remarkable period in Jewish history. Though, as Hans Walter Wolff always reminded us, "While David is Scripture's lousiest parent, he is, at the same time, Israel's greatest king."

On this day dedicated to kingship, I trust we won't get lost in the glories of that position. Instead, it's far better to reflect on a recent Call to Action talk by Sr. Diane Bergant. This scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures zeroed in on the importance of an oft-forgotten biblical person: Ruth.

Diane pointed out that this fascinating woman wasn't even a Jew. She belonged to a despised people: the Moabites. But after the unexpected death of her Jewish husband, who had migrated to Moab with his mother Naomi, Ruth unselfishly stepped forward and offered to travel to Israel and care for her widowed mother-in-law. It was a heroic gesture. Normally it would condemn the young foreigner to a life of widowhood. But because of her dedication to Naomi, she eventually marries Boaz, a wealthy landowner, and as we read in the book's second last paragraph, "Yahweh enabled her to conceive and she bore a son . . . They called him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David."

The author of Ruth did his or her best to remind the Israelite readers of the book that the only reason their greatest king even existed was because his Gentile great-grandmother had been willing given up her own future and dedicated her life to caring for her Jewish mother-in-law.

In a parallel way, Luke wants us also to zero in on the dedication dimension of the crucified Jesus. Though "above him there was an inscription that read, 'This is the King of the Jews,'" Luke's Jesus demonstrates his kingly power not by saving himself, but by his concern for one of the criminals sharing Golgotha with him that fateful Friday afternoon.

Jesus answers the dying man's request to be remembered when he comes into his kingdom with a promise far beyond anything the thief could have expected. "This day," he assures him, "you will be with me in Paradise."

Knowing this, the most important line in today's Colossians pericope becomes the statement, "He (Jesus) is the head of the body, the church." Jesus is both the person and force who points the direction into which we Christians should always be traveling. Though Jesus is "... the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation," he's also the person we daily strive to imitate.

Commenting in a recent Church Chat column about his recent visit to the traveling Vatican Splendors exhibit, Tom Smith writes, "All that Vatican splendor washes away the human service inspired by the gospel, ignores the experience of genuine faith communities, and enshrines the institutional church. The splendor of the art obliterates the splendor of a humble, lived faith."

I'm certain if Ruth lived long enough she would have often reminded her great-grandson that self-giving is at the heart of faith, as the kingly Jesus once reminded us from Golgotha. True faith revolves around it.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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NOVEMBER 28, 2010: FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 2:1-5 Romans 13:11-14 Matthew 24:37-44

As I mentioned back in September, the great Hans Walter Wolff was convinced that the role of a biblical prophet is to provide people with the future implications of their present actions. That's why few prophets died with their sandals tucked snugly under their beds. Most people choose not to be reminded of those implications. They were content to zero in only on the present, rarely letting their minds wander beyond the immediate situation in which they found themselves.

Our sacred authors often take us into the future. Even on those occasions when they bring up the past, their goal frequently is to make certain our future isn't just a repeat of those former days.

First-Isaiah always has the threat of an Assyrian invasion before his eyes, yet he still paints a picture of a future world in which the military doesn't even exist. In what would become some of his best-known words, he speaks about the day when ". . . they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again."

Of course, the prophet is convinced such an ideal world will come only when people actually walk "in the light of Yahweh." Such a belief implies that all Jews will first have to be committed to Yahweh's values and carry out Yahweh's word. If they refuse to do either, Gentiles not only won't flock to Yahweh's mountain, they'll do their best to destroy both the city built on top of Mt. Zion and the people who reside in it.

The earliest followers of Jesus also focused on the future. They believed Jesus' return was just around the corner; an event which would completely transform the earth and its inhabitants. All our present problems would completely disappear. There was just one problem: his Parousia didn't happen as quickly as they'd anticipated. That's why Paul is compelled to remind the Christian community in Rome that their present actions aren't mirroring the world they're anticipating. "Let us live honorably," the Apostle writes, "as in daylight; not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarreling and jealousy. Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the desires of the flesh."

Paul's reasoning is perfect. If we're expecting to be one with the risen Jesus after the Parousia, why aren't we doing those things which make us one with the risen Jesus right here and now? How can we look forward to a future without imaging that future in the present?

Matthew, who also seems convinced the Parousia will happen in his lifetime, reflects on the suddenness of that glorious day. He clearly states his thesis: "The Son of Man is coming at a time you least expect!"

To get his point across, the evangelist brings up the unexpectedness of the great Genesis flood. "The coming of the Son of Man will repeat what happened in Noah's time." But he then mentions something which could be confusing. "Two men will be out in the field . . . Two women will be grinding meal; one will be taken and one will be left." Matthew doesn't seem to be referring here to being taken to heaven. Rather, he appears to be zeroing in on those who are "taken" by the faith, and those who aren't - always a great mystery for early Christians. If this interpretation is correct, Matthew is warning his readers to make their faith the guiding point of their entire lives, the "awakeness" on which they ground their expectations of the future.

Some 5th-century Christians, instead of being awake with faith, must have fallen asleep. There's no other way to explain how St. Augustine could have developed his criteria for waging a "just war:" a 1st century Christian oxymoron.

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