

## SEPTEMBER 16, 2012: TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 50:5-9a, James 2:1-18, Mark 8:27-35

Today's first reading was one of Carroll Stuhlmueller's favorites. He always reminded his students, "It gives us the best biblical definition of a disciple of God." Just one problem: for some unknown reason the first part of Deutero-Isaiah's verse 4 has been left out of our liturgical selection. "Yahweh God has given me a well-trained tongue, that I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them. Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear...."

Every morning God's true disciples hit the floor listening, expecting to hear something today they never heard yesterday. The prophet believes they're especially to listen for the voice of the "weary," those who desperately long to be roused by God's word.

Psychologist and author Eugene Kennedy once mentioned something I've never been able to shake. "One of the main tasks of organized religion should be to make this life more bearable for people, to make it a joyful experience." Trained in pre-Vatican II religion classes, I once thought organized religion's main task was to get people into heaven. Then I started studying Scripture.

It's evident Deutero-Isaiah, who didn't even know about a heaven/hell afterlife, would have heartily agreed with Kennedy, as would the author of James' letter. It doesn't take a doctorate in Scripture to realize the latter is fed-up with some religious people's habit of just telling those in need, "I'll say one for you." The writer believes the weary really aren't helped by someone's promise of a future life that will eventually eradicate the problems they're facing in this life. What about doing something right here and now to get rid of at least some of those problems? "Faith itself," he writes, "if it does not have works, is dead. . . . Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works."

Today's gospel pericope couldn't mesh better with our first two passages. It provides us with the first of three steps Mark believes are essential to dying with Jesus. (We'll hear the second step next week. But we'll have to wait five more weeks to learn the third.) The three are found in successive chapters: 8, 9, and 10. Each artificially follows an identical prediction/misunderstanding/clarification pattern. Jesus first predicts his passion, death and resurrection. Someone then says or does something which shows a total misunderstanding about dying with Jesus. Finally, Jesus clarifies what dying is all about.

Peter is the first "misunderstander." He ". . . took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him." Jesus instantly cuts him down, "Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."

Two important points: Satan in Hebrew originally referred to an obstacle in someone's path, and disciple in Greek is literally a "go-behinder." Jesus tells Peter that his plans for a "no death" Christianity is an obstacle to his ministry. If he's a real disciple, he should position himself behind, not in front of him.

Also, because it would make no sense for Jesus to encourage someone to carry a cross before his own crucifixion, scholars generally believe the historical Jesus originally told his followers to carry their "tau." It's a "T," the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Pious Jews embroidered them on their tunics as an outward sign they were willing to follow Yahweh's will to the extreme, to the tau.

Mark's Jesus basically teaches that the first step in dying with him is the determination to do whatever God asks of us, no matter the consequences.

No doubt Deutero-Isaiah and the author of James are nodding in agreement.

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## SEPTEMBER 23, 2012: TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 2:12,17-20 James 3:16-4:3 Mark 9:30-37

One of the biggest problems people of faith encounter is the constant temptation to turn their religion into a fertility cult. Biblical prophets from Elijah to Jesus frequently condemn such practices.

Fertility is at the top of everyone's prayer list in the ancient world. Because happiness and fulfillment normally revolve around the number of children they have, the bushels per acre their fields yield, and the offspring their livestock produce, they logically turn to the gods for help in increasing their fertility in each of these areas, eventually developing prayers and actions which guarantee the god's help. They believe that if they use certain words a specific number of times, accompanied by the correct actions, the god or goddess is forced to give them what they want. These cults basically tie their gods' hands behind their backs. They must give whoever employs them whatever they want.

Biblical Israelites are forbidden to engage in such cults. They're encouraged to relate to Yahweh, not control him/her. Though they're expected to pray for "stuff," they're never to do it in such a way that Yahweh is forced to grant their wishes. They can wrestle with God, protest God's refusal to do what they want, even, like Jeremiah, call God vile names, but they can never do anything which gives them power over God.

That's why today's Wisdom author praises the "just" one, a biblical way of referring to anyone who develops proper relationships with Yahweh and those whom they daily encounter. As we hear, many people don't know how to deal with someone who practices justice; someone who tries to relate to, not control others. They'd be overjoyed if the just were immediately wiped off the face of the earth.

James reminds us what happens in a world in which people are constantly trying to control one another. "Where do the wars and where do the conflicts among you come from? — You covet but do not possess, you kill and envy but you cannot obtain; you fight and wage war." The author's convinced only the righteous -those carrying out Yahweh's command to relate, not control - can "cultivate peace."

Jesus treats the same topic in our gospel pericope: Mark's second way of dying with Jesus. Unlike last week, today's misunderstanding is implicit, happening on the road while his disciples were "discussing among themselves... who was the greatest."

It's significant that Jesus directs his clarification to the Twelve. As we've seen before, he chose this group to be an outward sign of the inclusivity of his message. He invites all Jews, from all twelve tribes, to accept the reform of Judaism he's preaching.

By arguing their relative importance, Jesus' disciples are stating their belief that he's put some of them in a position to control others. That's why he takes a child, places it in their midst, puts his arms around it and says, "Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me."

Presuming children are some of the community's most controllable members, Mark's Jesus is insisting his followers relate even to them. The first Christians actually experienced the risen Jesus in the most powerless. But they did so only after they died enough to relinquish control over those who are so controllable.

Biblical prophets would not only classify some of our religious practices - novenas, first Fridays, etc. - as fertility cults, neither would they let us overlook our natural tendency to have power over others. Given the world in which we live, it's a constant challenge to first envision, then build the new land of world both the historical and risen Jesus have in mind.

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