

JANUARY 27, 2013: THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10 I Corinthians 12:12-30 Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

A good scriptural rule of thumb is that the bigger the problem, the more space the sacred author devotes to confronting it. When it comes to recognizing the body of the risen Christ among us, very little is said biblically about discovering that body in the Eucharistic bread and wine. On the other hand, whole chapters of Paul's letters are given over to surfacing that body in the Christian community.

It takes little effort to believe Jesus is present in the former. No skin off my teeth to say he's in the bread and wine. Such a belief entails just a few intellectual and practical implications; adjustments that have little effect on how I live my daily life. Because I believed the bread had been replaced by Jesus, I bowed my head when I passed a Catholic church, genuflected before I went in my pew, kept reverential silence before, during and after Mass, and would never think of touching the host. That was about it.

But it takes a lot of effort and often entails more biting intellectual and practical implications to believe he/she is present in the everyday people who come in and out of our lives. No wonder Paul gives so much space to dealing with that particular issue.

His basic thesis: "You are Christ's body, and individually parts of it." (Remember, "Christ" for Paul means the risen, not the historical, Jesus.) Belief that all followers of Jesus comprise the body of Christ isn't just some pious Christian afterthought - something we can explore for extra credit. Recall that Paul stated in the previous chapter that only those who recognize the body of Christ in one another should be permitted to receive the Eucharistic body of Christ. It's one of the essentials of our faith. "As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ."

Each of us has been gifted by the Holy Spirit with the necessary talents to make that body a reality in all we do and experience. Since we're the body of the risen Christ, not the historical Jesus, we, like him/her, are a new creation. There's no longer a distinction between Jew and Gentile, slave or free, male or female. There are no "preexisting conditions" determining which gifts are given to which person. The only condition is that we use our gifts for the "benefit" of all in the community. And next week we'll learn how we are to package each of our gifts to make it a benefit, not a detriment to the community.

If we're actually trying to become the body of Christ, then, as Jesus announces in today's gospel pericope, we're expected to join in fulfilling Third-Isaiah's mission to bring glad tidings to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and proclaim a year acceptable to Yahweh. Quite a job! Those who only recognize Jesus' presence in the bread and wine are theologically off the hook.

After almost 50 years of ministering as a priest, I'm convinced many of my fellow Catholics have yet to understand their privileges and their responsibilities which flow from being a member of the body of Christ. When that insight eventually hits, I trust they'll take Nehemiah's advice, "Do not be sad, and do not weep.... .Go, eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks .. . For today is holy to Yahweh." Any day we discover what God expects of us is "other," just as the rest of our lives will then also be holy, different from other lives, as the risen Jesus expects them to be.

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FEBRUARY 3, 2013: FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19 I Corinthians 12:31-13:13 Luke 4:21-30

Both Jesus and Jeremiah are depicted in today's first and third readings as fulfilling the second rule for distinguishing real prophets from fake prophets: real prophets suffer because of their ministry. But our second reading verifies the third rule: those who follow the words and example of real prophets also suffer.

Jeremiah's call leaves no doubt about the pain he'll have to endure. "Be not crushed," Yahweh commands, "on their account. . . . They will fight against you but not prevail over you . . ." One need only turn to Jeremiah 20 - Scripture's most depressing chapter - to surface the pain the prophet endured every day of his ministry. He tells us exactly what the "word of Yahweh" meant for him.

Jesus suffers in a similar way in today's gospel pericope. Speaking in his hometown synagogue, he quickly discovers his message isn't very well received by his former friends and family members. "They rose up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town had been built, to hurl him down headlong." Though at this point of his ministry, Jesus escapes, he's not going to avoid death for long.

What did Jeremiah and Jesus say to cause otherwise good people to want to do them in?

Jeremiah's constant message revolves around "returning to Yahweh:" insisting people get rid of those peripheral aspects of their faith that they've turned into "essentials." The prophet points out, for instance, that they're more concerned with liturgical regulations than with loving of their neighbors; with the upkeep of shrines and discussing legal minutiae than with going one on one with their God. People don't like being told their cherished religious practices aren't cherished by God. If they could rid themselves of Jeremiah, they could once again return to their unchallenging beliefs.

Jesus' problem, on the other hand, springs from his conviction that Yahweh is just as much God of the Gentiles as of the Jews. His two examples of Yahweh helping Gentiles - the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian - aren't well received by his synagogue audience. They're uncomfortable with a God who pushes the religious envelope, and with anyone who forces them to relate to such a God. Once they eliminate Jesus, they eliminate their unease, and can return to the security blanket of organized religion.

Paul of Tarsus quickly discovered that those who followed real prophets also inherited their persecution. Though today's I Corinthians passage is one of the best-known in the Bible - it's proclaimed in at least half of the weddings I "perform" - few people of faith dare carry out its demands. We're afraid of what would happen if we actually made love an integral part of everything we do. Without doubt, if we became patient, kind, stopped being jealous, pompous, inflated and rude, refused to seek our own interests, got rid of our quick temper and brooding over injuries, and stopped rejoicing over wrongdoing, we'd relinquish all of our psychological defenses. People will run roughshod over us.

Yet only when we put love at the center of our lives will we be able to carry on the ministry of Jesus, and actually become the body of Christ.

Back in Genesis 3, the Yahwistic author of the Torah taught that we can't accomplish good unless we're willing to put up with the pain that accompanies our efforts to achieve it. Jeremiah and Jesus would agree. But in the long run, both were convinced that the good we bring about is always more pervasive and powerful than the evil it overcomes.