

MARCH 10, 2013: FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Joshua 5:9a, 10-12 I Corinthians 5:17-21 Luke 15:1-3,11-32

Considering how well-known and significant today's gospel passage is, it's amazing that, before the new lectionary was issued in 1970, we never heard Jesus' story of the prodigal father proclaimed during a Sunday liturgy. And frequently when it did come up in religion classes or sermons, the last part - the older brother's reaction - was left out. I suspect part of the reason it wasn't as emphasized in our Catholic teaching as it was in Luke's gospel and early Christianity revolves around the development of sacramental confession.

In my grade school religion classes, sacramental confession was about the only way our sins could be forgiven. Though a door was always left open for Protestants and other "confessionless" people to be forgiven by making an act of perfect contrition, many of my teachers pointed out these unfortunate individuals couldn't ever be 100 percent certain their sins were actually forgiven by employing that iffy method. Besides, the priest who taught my confirmation classes even wiped out that option by mentioning that, in his opinion, no one was capable of ever making a perfect act of contrition. Thank God I was born a Catholic!

Of course, at that point, I knew nothing of how sacramental confession came into existence; that originally it, and the public penance which accompanied it, was reserved only for people who had committed apostasy, adultery or murder; sins which could destroy the Christian community. Nor did I know anything about Thomas Aquinas' disturbing Summa Theologica answer to the question, "At what point in the confessional process are one's sins actually forgiven?" Is it when the priest gives absolution, after we say our act of contrition, when we finish our penance? The greatest of theologians responded, "At the moment you're sorry for your sins." Our sins are forgiven before we ever start to confess.

The earliest Christians would not have been as distracted by sacramental confession as we later Christians are. They, like the son of the prodigal father, surprisingly receive God's forgiveness as something freely offered, no strings attached, even if we never can make restitution for the harm our sinful actions created.

The older brother is the problem element of the parable, the reason Luke narrates this story in the first place. He can't help but point out to his father that he's constantly played by the rules, never even pushed the envelope. Yet his profligate brother is now on a par with him. He's convinced that's not the way parents, or God should operate. Everyone is to get what they deserve. To the boy's dismay, Jesus simply points out that neither most parents, or God operate on that level.

Perhaps that's why we have this particular I Corinthians passage as a second reading. Paul reminds his community, "Whoever is in Christ is a new creation; the old things have passed away; behold new things have come. And all this is from God who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation ...." Those who are other Christs are expected to act in ways different from everyone else. We, like Jesus, are to put no conditions on our forgiveness. Someone's desire to be forgiven is enough.

Just as the Israelites finally reach the Promised Land in today's Joshua narrative, celebrate their first Passover, and rejoice in the completion of their Exodus from Egypt, so we followers of Jesus are expected to be a rejoicing, forgiven people. But, according to the plan of God revealed through Jesus, we can only rejoice in God's forgiveness if people around us are rejoicing in our no-strings-attached forgiveness of them. If God's prodigal with us, what right do we have to be stingy with others?

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MARCH 17, 2013: FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT  
Isaiah 43:16-21    Philippians 3:8-14    John 8:1-11

One of the advantages of reading Deutero-Isaiah in Hebrew is noticing how often he uses participles in place of finite verbs. There's a big difference between saying, "I came here today," and saying "Coming here today." In the former, the act of coming is in the past; in the latter, it continues.

The unnamed prophet responsible for chapters 40-55 of Isaiah is active during the Babylonian Exile, a time when most Jews presumed Yahweh's glory days were in the past. By the time Deutero-Isaiah comes on the scene in the late 530s BCE, they'd been captive for over 50 years. Few believed they'd ever see Jerusalem again.

Though the prophet constantly uses Exodus imagery in his oracles, his audience reminds him that that saving event happened 700 years before. It was something they read about in their history books, not something pertaining to their present predicament.

Convinced his fellow-Jews are wrong, the prophet reminds them that what Yahweh did, Yahweh continues to do. That's why he starts today's pericope with participles: "Opening a way in the sea ... leading out chariots .. ." God's still doing what God once did. Yahweh's freeing Yahweh's people in Babylon just as Yahweh once freed them in Egypt.

But then, if someone missed his participial point, the prophet hits the theological nail on the head: "Remember not the events of the past," Yahweh commands, "the things of long ago consider not; see I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" Though Yahweh continually saves, Yahweh doesn't like repeats. God's saving us today in ways no one would have thought possible 700 years before.

Deutero-Isaiah would have agreed with one of Marshall McLuhan's most famous quotes: "We drive into the future using only our rear-view mirror." We're experts on the salvific past, not the salvific present.

It's against this background that we also should hear Paul's comment to the Philippian community, "Forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus." There's always something new for the Apostle to experience, something no one has yet experienced. Faith is never the "same old same old."

Why? According to Paul, we're always on the road to achieving a better and deeper life; the more we achieve, the more we're given the insight and power to achieve. "It is not that I have already taken hold of it," he writes, "or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ Jesus." The quest to become another Christ never ends.

Today's gospel passage warns us not to be distracted in that quest by focusing on other people's sinfulness. Though experts in John's gospel remind us that this well-known narrative wasn't originally part of the Fourth Gospel - that's why it's relegated to the footnotes in most modern translations - it still conveys a basic Christian message. We've got enough of our own sins to worry about without bringing up anyone else's sins. "Let the one among you," Jesus proclaims, "who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her!"

We have enough to occupy all our time between now and eternity just surfacing and zeroing in on how we're responding to God working in our daily lives. If we insist on becoming experts on God's glories, it should only be because we're anxious to discover those same glories in the present. Biblical faith demands we become experts in theological participles.

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