

DECEMBER 1, 2013: FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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

Matthew is probably the last author of the Christian Scriptures to presume Jesus is going to return in the Parousia either in his lifetime or the lifetime of his readers. Yet, as we hear in today's gospel pericope, some in his community are already questioning Jesus' imminent return, else the evangelist wouldn't be so insistent on watchfulness. "As it was in the days of Noah," Matthew's Jesus warns, "... so will it be also at the coming of the Son of Man." Just as most pre-flood people weren't looking for the deluge, so many of Jesus' second and third generation followers had given up looking for his return.

In order to be one of those "taken," Matthew's readers must, "Stay awake!" Though Jesus' followers as a whole have been waiting for over 40 years, they must maintain their alertness. "For at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come."

When prophets like Isaiah speak today of Yahweh's salvation they seem to imply that it might be in the distant future, but when it finally arrives, it'll take care of all the peoples' problems in one fell swoop. Any fear, for instance, that the Chosen People are insignificant will instantly be erased once "the mountain of Yahweh's house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills." Teachings which only a few follow now will one day be acknowledged by everyone. Gentiles will ". . . climb Yahweh's mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob." They'll be instructed in his ways and walk in his paths.

The effect of everyone on earth following the commands which Yahweh originally gave only to the Jews will be breathtaking. "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." All people will then be able to live a life that once was only a dream for a few.

Isaiah doesn't seem to present his vision of universal peace as an event which will take place in stages. Once his "days to come" actually come our lives will change in an instant.

Listening to today's Roman's passage we suspect that Paul identifies with Isaiah's brand of instant salvation. But there's a big difference in what triggers that instant. Like Matthew, the event driving the Apostle's hopes and dreams isn't the moment all people will acknowledge Jerusalem and its Law of Moses as the norm for their behavior; it's Jesus' Parousia.

Writing in the late 50s or early 60s to a community he promises to visit soon, Paul reminds them of the obvious: "Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed; the night is advanced, the day is at hand."

He would have been amazed that we're hearing these words almost 2,000 years later, and Jesus still hasn't returned in the way he and all early Christians expected. Instant salvation wasn't just around the corner.

By the end of the first Christian century, it would become clearer and clearer that salvation was something we'd have to work at day by day. We weren't going to instantly experience it in the near future. Should the glorified Jesus unexpectedly come while we're in the middle of bringing it about, no one would complain. But the actions which Paul once believed imitators of Jesus were committed to carry out only for the short term we now see as encompassing all our lives into the distant future.

Our hope is that by daily "conducting ourselves properly" our world will eventually change, change in the ways our ancestors in the faith once thought it would change in a split second.

COPYRIGHT 2013 - ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN

DECEMBER 8, 2013: SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 11:1-10 Romans 15:4-9 Matthew 3:1-12

One of my Scripture professors at St. Louis University, Fr. Frank Cleary, was one of the first Americans to travel to the Soviet Union in the 70s when that highly secretive country opened its doors to tourists. When he returned, we pumped him with questions about his experiences. He mentioned that the scariest part of his trip happened when he was leaving the Moscow airport for the return flight to America.

Before he was permitted to board the plane a security person held his passport picture next to his face for what seemed a very long time. He continually looked back and forth at the photo and Frank, checking various facial features to make certain the person who was about to leave the country was actually the same person who had arrived there a few days before, and not a fugitive trying to escape the country with a fake passport. Finally convinced the person in the picture was actually the person boarding the plane, he let Frank leave.

Most Christians employ a parallel process when they speak about Jesus as Messiah. We have an idea there's a picture of the Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures that we can hold up next to Jesus to identify him as the real McCoy that Jews had been expecting for centuries. There's just one problem: there's no one picture of the Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures. If we used that means of identification, Jesus would never be permitted to board the plane.

There are many messianic pictures in the Hebrew Scriptures, none of which completely mirrors Jesus as Messiah. Each generation of Jews conceived of the person who would eventually save them in concepts different from the prior generation. As their needs changed, so did their idea of Messiah change. Contrary to common belief, there's no one consistent picture.

Isaiah, for instance, in today's passage conceives of the Messiah in terms of a king from the family of David. Like his regal ancestor, this new king will be "a sprout from the stump of Jesse." But he'll differ greatly from some of the 8th century BCE kings the prophet has recently encountered. Because he's open to Yahweh's spirit, he'll create a world in which natural enemies will become friends, making certain that "the earth shall be filled with knowledge (experience) of Yahweh."

Though Paul believes Jesus will eventually create the end results which Isaiah expects of a royal Messiah, the Apostle brings in an element which the prophet seems to ignore: the community.

Unlike Isaiah's Messiah, the risen Jesus isn't going to bring about this new world all by himself. He's counting on us to play an essential role in its creation. As Paul reminds the Christian community in Rome, it's up to us to "think in harmony with one another." Among other things, that means we have to "welcome one another as Christ welcomes (us.)"

And especially during Paul's ministry, the group many Jewish Christians had the most problem welcoming was Gentiles. Though Isaiah envisioned non-Jews seeking out Yahweh, the Apostle envisions Jewish Christians taking the first step and seeking out Gentiles as equal partners in the salvation Jesus offers. Only when all God's people relate correctly with one another will God's peace become a reality.

That seems to be part of the "good fruit" John the Baptizer expected all God's people to produce.

True followers of Jesus long ago came to understand that their Messiah was only part of the show. They, and their relations with others were the rest of the show. No wonder St. Augustine always handed the Eucharistic bread to people with the reminder, "Receive what you are: the Body of Christ (the Messiah)."