

OCTOBER 5, 2014: TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 5:1-7 Philippians 4:6-9 Matthew 21:33-43

I grew up hearing lots of “apocalyptic” sermons. Based on “external circumstances” - especially after we learned about atomic bombs - there was a fear the whole world could one day be wiped out. Our pastor frequently employed that fear to warn us about God’s anger. According to his theology, God was furious (especially about women’s immodest clothes.) His vindictive hand was perpetually raised, poised to crash down and annihilate our planet. Only the Blessed Virgin’s concern for, and love of her fellow human beings was keeping us from destruction. If she ever took a break from holding back God’s hand, we’d be doomed.

Devotion to Mary grew and God became more distant. How do you build a meaningful relationship with someone who, left to his own devices, would kill you?

That’s not the picture of God which comes out of today’s three readings. Though the God of Scripture expects us to carry through on our essential, covenant responsibilities, it’s for our benefit, not his/her benefit, that we fulfill those demands. God doesn’t have to annihilate us; we do that on our own. God’s normal biblical role is to prevent destruction; not cause it.

The concept of an afterlife as we know it didn’t evolve in Judaism until a century before Jesus’ birth, six centuries after Isaiah delivered the words of our first reading. So when the prophet speaks about Yahweh constructing a vineyard and harvesting fruit from it, he’s not looking forward to those unique vines getting into heaven one day by producing the proper grapes. He’s simply stating his conviction that doing what Yahweh asks will eventually bring about “judgment and justice,” attributes which will guarantee a happy fulfilled life right here and now. Without them, we have only “bloodshed and outcry:” a hell on earth.

Matthew’s Jesus bases his well-known allegory on Isaiah’s narrative but he changes the story in two significant ways. First, he inserts himself into it as the son of the landowner. Second, he refers to something the evangelist’s Jewish/Christian readers would have already experienced: “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit.”

The historical Jesus’ message revolved around people surfacing God’s kingdom around us: recognizing God working effectively in our everyday lives. He shared this insight with his fellow Jews, expecting them to change their value systems, to experience Yahweh in every situation and everyone they encountered. But only a few of them were willing to retool their minds, to refocus their view of reality. By the time Matthew writes – in the mid-80s – far more Gentiles are converting to Jesus’ reform than Jews. Discovering God’s kingdom - once a Jewish prerogative - is now becoming the trademark of the risen Jesus’ non-Jewish followers. Matthew’s Jesus is forced to deal with this unexpected turnabout. In his mind, its root cause is a lack of crop production: the majority of God’s Chosen People simply weren’t using what God gave them through Jesus to produce the harvest God intended. They were suffering the logical consequences of their inaction. Yahweh didn’t have to do anything to make their situation worse than it was.

It’s significant that Paul, who was expecting Jesus’ Second Coming in his lifetime, wasn’t worried about experiencing that event. “Have no anxiety,” he tells the Christian community in Philippi. “Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you.”

Those who fear God intervening in their lives have never known the God Jesus preached and experienced. After all, he was convinced God was already working in our lives in loving, not frightening ways.

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OCTOBER 12, 2014, TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 25:6-10a Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20 Matthew 22:1-14

(Please omit the last part of today's gospel pericope. It originally was a completely different parable, joined to the other simply because both had to do with wedding feasts.)

Today's gospel pericope took shape long before Matthew decided to include it in his gospel. Both he and Luke discovered it in a document which disappeared several centuries after Jesus' historical ministry. Scholars refer to that lost scroll as the "Q:" a collection of Jesus' sayings which circulated in the earliest church, and which Matthew and Luke employed as a source for their writings. Whenever we surface an identical passage in Matthew and Luke not found in Mark, it's almost always from the Q.

Knowing the pre-gospel history of this pericope tells us how early the general Jewish rejection of Jesus' reform became a problem for those Jews who accepted his message, personified by the church for whom Matthew wrote. Why would the people for whom Yahweh sent a messiah eventually reject the messiah? One way the earliest Christian preachers dealt with this unforeseen development was to compare the overwhelming Jewish rejection of Jesus' faith to a rejected wedding invitation.

It's significant that today's gospel begins with the phrase, "The kingdom of heaven may be likened . . ." Matthew's Jesus employs "kingdom of heaven" as a way to describe God working effectively in our everyday lives. In this specific situation, the evangelist insists we're always invited to experience God breaking into whatever we do, discovering God as the essential aspect of who we are. But, it's just an invitation. No one's forced to discover God on that level. Only those who freely accept the invitation of God will have an experience of God.

Like all invitations, it presents us with a choice. It's up to us to determine the more important event on that particular day. What are we willing to give up; what best fits our schedule? What creates the least hassle? And our choices always have consequences. (At the time Matthew's gospel was written, many Christians believed the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE was partially a result of Judaism's rejection of Jesus.)

But before we come down heavy handed on gospel Jews, we must appreciate that Jesus' invitation to experience God's kingdom wasn't exactly the invitation most Jews were expecting. Many probably would have taken today's Isaiah reading literally, believing that one day, when the messiah arrived, there actually would be a great banquet on Mt. Zion.

We know from the gospel story of Jesus riding a donkey instead of a horse into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday that the historical Jesus constantly had to deal with people misinterpreting his messiahship. During his earthly ministry most Jews believed the messiah's main task was to rid Israel of Roman occupation. Military leaders rode horses, not donkeys. Jesus' idea of salvation was quite different from the majority of his fellow Jews.

As I mentioned above, for this Galilean carpenter, salvation revolved around experiencing God working effectively in one's daily life. That's the message he preached; the message he lived. That experience radically changed the way one approached and lived life.

Paul certainly was convinced that sharing Jesus' faith brought him a unique salvation. He reminds the Philippians today that external wealth or want no longer matters. All that counts is that God supplies whatever we need.

I presume many of Jesus' contemporaries didn't understand the significance of the event to which they were being invited. They compared his invitation to the one they'd created for themselves through the centuries. When they didn't match, they rejected it.

The lesson is clear and challenging. Not only are we expected to respond to God's invitation to experience him/her, but we're also expected to be surprised at how God actually enters our life. Preconceived invitations are not permitted.