

OCTOBER 30TH, 2016: THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 11:22-12:2 II Thessalonians 1:11-2:2 Luke 19:1-10

On one hand, our sacred authors presume their readers are committed to seeing things other people overlook. But on the other hand, if they actually did see those things, there'd be no need for our authors to write. It's precisely because people of God don't always live up to their commitments that we have our Scriptures. In some sense, our biblical authors are in the "reminding" business, making certain we don't forget the essentials of our faith.

Today's Wisdom author has no problem assuming this role. Though he or she seems to be one of the first sacred authors to believe in an afterlife the writer also deals with the problem of evil in the world right here and now, especially when that evil is personified in certain individuals. The author's first principle is that Yahweh created the world in which we live, a world in which evil is always mixed with good. That's why Yahweh constantly shows mercy to the creation Yahweh brought into existence. But even more important, Yahweh's "imperishable spirit is in all things!" No matter if there's evil in us; Yahweh's undying spirit is also in us, a spirit which will continue to exist even beyond our earthly existence. Long before we meet God face to face, people of faith are committed to noticing God right here and now in all God's creation. If we acknowledge that presence, we always have an opportunity to "abandon" the evil which at times permeates us.

The disciple of Paul responsible for writing II Thessalonians zeroes in on that same commitment. Yet he goes beyond just recognizing God's spirit in creation. He also recognizes the risen Jesus in those around him. His goal is to make certain "that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him."

Yet, we live in a world in which we experience a lot of distractions, impeding us from surfacing the risen Jesus in our daily lives. This particular writer especially has to deal with the community's preoccupation with Jesus' Parousia. Many are so anxious for his Second Coming that they fail to notice how, in his risen presence, he's already come into the lives of each of them.

But of course, the greatest obstacle always revolves around the actual people in whom God and the risen Jesus is present. Luke deals with this problem in today's gospel pericope. As we saw two weeks ago, tax collectors were probably the most despised and evil people in the historical Jesus' lifetime. Though it's not too hard to commit ourselves to experiencing God's presence in all people in the abstract, it's another thing to actually pick out one specific individual and surface God in him or her, especially if that person is a thief and a traitor to the country you love. Zacchaeus perfectly fits that category.

It's important to note that Jericho is the last stop before Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, the last stop on a journey that began more than 10 chapters ago. All along the Jerusalem road, Luke's been emphasizing Jesus' teachings and personality for those who are on the same road to dying and rising with him. After all those miles, can we find God in someone like Zacchaeus? Perhaps in narrating this encounter Luke is telling us the best way to surface God in others is to help them surface God in themselves, especially by showing our honest concern for them, no matter what other people think or say.

If we think the "lost" are going to be saved by God without our participation, then we're refusing to notice God's presence in ourselves.

NOVEMBER 6TH, 2016: THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
II Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14 II Thessalonians 2:16-3:5 Luke 20:27-35

We're so accustomed to thinking and speaking about an afterlife that we can't imagine people of biblical faith not believing in a hereafter. Yet the vast majority of the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures knew only this life. That's why their theologies revolve around Yahweh rewarding us for our good and punishing us for our evil right here and now, long before our physical deaths.

Only about 100 years before the birth of the historical Jesus did some Pharisees begin to reason – especially in chapter 1 of Wisdom – that if we build a relationship with Yahweh in this life, Yahweh will continue that relationship into an afterlife. We especially hear that novel theology expressed in one of the Hebrew Scriptures' last books: Second Maccabees.

In today's reading from that book, the first of the seven martyred brothers, buying into that Pharisaical theology, can taunt his executioners with his conviction that “. . . you are depriving us of this present life, but the King of the world will raise us up to live again forever.” The fourth brother heroically states, “It is my choice to die at the hands of men with the hope God gives of being raised up by him; but for you, there will be no resurrection to life.” Obviously at this point of theological development there's still no concept of a hell (or a purgatory.) People only have a choice between resurrection and death. Those who have a proper relationship with Yahweh will live with Yahweh; those who don't will end up being dead for all eternity.

Obviously the authors of the Christian Scriptures bought into the faith of their mentor, Jesus, and also professed faith in an afterlife, else the unknown author of our II Thessalonians reading could never talk about an “everlasting encouragement.”

Yet as we hear in today's gospel pericope, the historical Jesus had to deal with a large segment of his fellow Jews – the Sadducees - who thought the Pharisees' teaching on being with Yahweh after this life was simply ridiculous. To prove their point they bring up the classic example of a woman successively married to seven brothers. They demand to know, “At the resurrection whose wife will that woman be?”

As part of his argument, Jesus goes back to the Exodus 3 burning bush passage. He reasons if Abraham and Isaac and Jacob weren't still alive after their deaths, Yahweh would have told Moses, “I was their God,” not “I am their God.” (Though we might disagree today with Jesus' exegesis of that particular passage, in his day and age, it followed all the rules of proper biblical interpretation.)

But his most important argument revolves around a mistake the Sadducees were making. They presumed the eternal life in which Jesus believed and taught was simply an eternal continuation of this life. Nothing could be further from the truth. This Galilean carpenter was convinced that our resurrected life will be a totally different existence from the life we live right here and now. Just as angels live a different life from ours, so a resurrected person will no longer have to live within the limits this life imposes. Our deepest relationships with one another, for instance, won't be restricted to the human boundaries of marriage. Once we cross into eternal life, we'll “neither marry nor be given in marriage.”

Though we often like to talk – in a consoling way - about our deceased loved ones continuing to do the things in heaven they enjoyed doing on earth, Jesus insists we'll eventually have to deal with the fact that our existence in heaven will be the biggest surprise we'll ever experience.