

NOVEMBER 22ND, 2020: CHRIST THE KING

Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17 I Corinthians 15:20-26, 28 Matthew 25:31-46

Our sacred authors have a unique problem: how do they conjure up images of God which accurately represent their experiences of God? They presume no matter what picture they surface, it's not going to do total justice to the God they know. Some aspects of their images work, others fail horribly. The author of the Song of Songs, for instance, discovered a parallel challenge when he compared his lover's hair to "a flock of goats streaming down from Gilead," and her nose to "the tower on Lebanon that looks toward Damascus." I don't think she appreciated every aspect of either image.

In spite of the "limping metaphors," our sacred authors present us with three distinct images of God in today's liturgical readings: a shepherd, a new Adam, and a king.

Deeply affected by the Babylonian Exile, Ezekiel hopes for Yahweh to directly break into Israel's salvation history and shepherd his/her dispirited people. They've been aimlessly wandering around for far too long. They've no other leader but Yahweh. "I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered . . . I myself will pasture my sheep; I will give them rest, says Yahweh God." Unless Yahweh steps in, they'll be left to a dog eat sheep world. God is their only hope.

Paul, on the other hand, reflects on the impact the risen Jesus has had on his friends in Corinth. It's as though the Apostle has read about President Roosevelt's plans for a "new deal." We're all starting from scratch. Just as Adam got us into the mess we're in by bringing death into the world, the risen Jesus – as the new Adam – has turned everything around by bringing life into our everyday experiences. What we once thought inevitable, the risen Jesus has destroyed. He/she's created a whole new "game" with a whole new deck of cards.

Yet, on this day of all days, the divine image on which we're most concentrating is that of king. Today's gospel pericope is one of our most frequently used passages of Scripture, especially employed during funeral liturgies. It's always comforting to reflect on how the deceased discovered the risen Jesus in his or her life by caring for the helpless in their midst. But today it's also important to reflect on how the Jewish biblical image of king revolved around caring for the helpless.

Historians remind us that on their 12th century BCE entrance into the Promised Land, those former Jewish Egyptian slaves didn't immediately set up a monarchy. Instead, as the book of Judges narrates, the 12 tribes formed themselves into a loose-knit confederation. Only when that confederation no longer met their needs did they begin discussing the possibility of a king.

But it would be a unique king, quite unlike the kings reigning in the countries surrounding Israel. Those monarchies were created to protect the rights of the high and mighty. Yahweh's kings, on the contrary, came into existence to defend those who had no clout. The high and mighty could take care of themselves. In Israel three groups of people always had legal access to the king 24/7: widows, orphans, and resident aliens. Given the customs of the ancient world, none of the three had anyone – except the Israelite king – to plead their cause.

That's why Matthew's Jesus, given the image of a Jewish king, identifies with the helpless in our midst: the poor, the refugees, the imprisoned. He not only pleads their cause, he becomes one with them. Whenever we care for any on that well-known list we eventually discover we've been caring for the royal, risen Jesus. The most surprising discovery we'll experience at the pearly gates. We've actually become royalty ourselves by helping the helpless.

NOVEMBER 29TH, 2020: FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7 I Corinthians 1:3-9 Mark 13:33-37

Today's Third-Isaiah reading only makes sense when we understand that our biblical writers believed people thought with their hearts, not their minds. (Feelings, on the other hand, originated with their kidneys, not their hearts.) So when the prophet accuses his people of "hardening their hearts to Yahweh," he's actually charging them with closing their minds to Yahweh. Since they don't expect anything from God, they don't even think about God. "There is none who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to cling to you; for you have hidden your face from us and have delivered us up to our guilt." Though Third-Isaiah knows Yahweh is on the verge of helping those recently released from the Babylonian Exile, God can only do what people permit God to do. How does one go about getting someone to recognize, "You are our father; we are the clay and you the potter; we are all the work of your hands." Anticipation of God's actions plays a big role in experiencing God's actions.

Not anticipating and recognizing God's actions can even apply to the gifts God gives us. That's one of the reasons Paul of Tarsus is forced to write I Corinthians. Though the Apostle begins his letter by praising the community for "not lacking any spiritual gift as you wait for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ," things go downhill from that point. Some individuals believe the Spirit has given them specific talents for their own sakes, not recognizing how each of those gifts was intended to meld together to build up the body of Christ for the common good. They're certainly blessed, for instance, with "all discourse and all knowledge." But some are using their knowledge and discourse to tear Christ's body apart.

What a shame to have hearts so hardened to the risen Jesus that we can't appreciate the gifts which are meant to help us carry on her/his ministry. How can we remain "firm to the end" when we don't understand in what that end consists? It's *our* end, not *my* end. Jesus' followers are working out this end together.

Perhaps the best line in all three readings is the Gospel Jesus' warning, "Be watchful! Be alert!" Those who strive to become other Christs are obligated to create a unique frame of mind. Though we "catechism-trained" Catholics were deliberately given the impression we pretty much had everything all together – and had put it into one book for safe-keeping – that's certainly not the mentality of our Christian sacred authors. Thankfully they wrote Scripture, not catechisms.

Mark's Jesus directs his call for watchfulness to a community still expecting an imminent Parousia. Yet the command to be alert goes far beyond just looking for Jesus' Second Coming. The story he tells demonstrates how constantly being on guard is an essential part of our faith. As servants of the risen Jesus, we never know when the "master" is going to break into our lives. There's no such thing as a sacred place, time, or person who can prepare us for such an encounter. The fact that it happens makes the place, time, or person sacred, not vice-versa. If we're not continually attentive, we'll miss what, as Jesus' servants, we've been uniquely trained to experience.

Perhaps we've been so occupied with learning "faith stuff" that we neglected to learn a faith "mentality." We might have just created lots of religious, absent-minded "professors;" people who know all about the facts of their faith, but aren't alert enough to know what's actually happening in their faith around them.

Too bad those catechism facts simply served as a sleeping pill. Maybe what we need now is a little more biblical caffeine in our faith.