

DECEMBER 19, 2010: FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 7:10-14 Romans 1:1-7 Matthew 1:18-24

Those who study Scripture today don't interpret some parts of the Hebrew Scriptures as the authors of the Christian Scriptures interpreted them. They didn't have the tools modern scholars possess to recreate the world of these ancient sacred authors. Often they had just the writers' words, and knew nothing of the events and context against which their words were produced - the key to interpreting the authors' original intention. Neither did they see the necessity of reading any author's entire work, or even large sections of it. It was sufficient for them to read only a verse or two, often taking the passage out of the writer's context and slipping it into their own. This certainly is the case with today's first and third readings.

Thirty-five years ago, during a diocesan clergy conference, Fr. Raymond Brown disturbed some of my brother priests by stating, "There are no predictions of Jesus, as such, anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures."

Hands quickly flew into the air. Fr. Brown patiently replied to each objection to his statement, especially the ones which sprang from Matthew applying Isaiah's famous "virgin-shall-conceive-Immanuel" quote to Mary and Jesus. Just by putting verse 14 back in the original context of Isaiah's chapter 7, Brown demonstrated that Ahaz needed an immediate sign; not one that would take over 700 years to be fulfilled. He then said that the pregnant girl (not necessarily a virgin) was probably Mrs. Ahaz, and the Immanuel, their son, Hezekiah.

Yet as recently as last week, I was reminded that old habits (or interpretations) die hard. One of my students showed me a "Pocket Catechism" her pastor had distributed that morning to the students and teachers of his Parish School of Religion. Question 22 read, "How do we know that Jesus is the promised Savior?" The answer: "Because all that the Prophets had foretold about the Savior was fulfilled in Jesus."

The late Sulpician Scripture scholar acknowledged biblical Israelites were certainly waiting for a Messiah. But Brown mentioned that he always assured his Jewish friends, "The specific Messiah you're expecting has yet to come." The Scripture passages which speak about a Messiah don't point people in the direction of Jesus - unless we fall into the trap of "eisegeting:" putting our meaning into the text instead of taking the sacred author's original meaning out of the text.

Yet we must do more than just realize our Christian authors didn't know the historical context of the Hebrew authors. We must also admit that many of us know little about the faith context of our Christian authors. Before these writers even began searching the Hebrew Scriptures for Jesus "proof texts," they'd experienced him/her alive and active in their everyday lives. The biblical texts they employed in their writings didn't create their faith in the risen Jesus, they simply helped surface different dimensions of that unique person's presence in their midst.

Their belief in Christ among them was an essential part of their lives even if no Hebrew Scriptures existed. Notice, for instance, that Paul employs no scriptural text to back up his belief that Jesus ". . . was made Son of God in power, according to the spirit of holiness, by his resurrection from the dead. . ." even though he just stated the gospel he proclaimed was ". . . promised long ago through (the) prophets, as the holy Scriptures proclaimed. . ." He obviously experienced Jesus before he checked the holy Scriptures.

We who both preside at Eucharist and also study Scripture, usually proclaim only the first of the two Advent prefaces. We simply can't force ourselves to say the words in the second preface, "His (Jesus') coming was foretold by all the prophets." But instead of quibbling over prediction/fulfillment passages, we should be leading our communities to experience our sacred authors' faith - in and outside of the Eucharist.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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FOSIL, BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

DECEMBER 25, 2010: CHRISTMAS

(Eucharist at Midnight)

Isaiah 9:1-6 Titus 2:11-14 Luke 2:1-14

A few months ago a woman reporter was allegedly harassed in a pro-football locker-room.

Shortly after the incident, a sports analyst was asked why female reporters think it important to invade such a “sacred precinct” immediately after a game. Can’t they just wait a half-hour or so for players and coaches to get cleaned up, put on their street clothes and hold a press conference? The analyst responded, “It’s important for a reporter to get a player’s reaction to something immediately after it happens. If he has time to think about it and formulate his response, he’ll almost always give you a different read on the event.”

Many of us forget that our Christian sacred authors aren’t giving us immediate locker-room reports about Jesus’ birth. They had almost 80 years to think about what they were going to say about it.

Their delay especially surfaces when we hear them employ the writings of other sacred authors. No one in Isaiah’s original audience, for instance, would have thought the prophet was predicting Jesus’ birth when he proclaimed, “. . . A child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulders dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-forever, Prince of Peace.” Scholars believe Isaiah is simply describing Hezekiah: King Ahaz’ newborn son. He never intended that his listeners focus on a stable in Bethlehem.

Yet since not even Hezekiah ushered in the ideal age the Israelites were expecting, it makes sense that Jesus’ early followers eventually applied these words to him, the leader they believed would actually bring this special period into existence. Of course, they were looking at this text from a 700 year perspective.

Even Paul’s disciple who authored the letter to Titus had more than a lifetime to reflect on Jesus before he wrote. Like Isaiah, he revolved his desire for a better world around one specific individual. Only this time it wasn’t a person recently born, it was Jesus, born several generations before he composed his letter.

Jesus had already died and rose. That’s why the author tells his readers, “It was he (Jesus) who sacrificed himself for us, to redeem us from all unrighteousness and to cleanse for himself a people of his own, eager to do what is right.” Other Christs not only look back fondly on Jesus’ coming, they also look forward to the things they’re committed to carry out in order to make that ideal world a reality.

All who carefully read Luke/Acts know the evangelist had “a thing” about the Roman Empire. Since the great anti-Christian persecutions had yet to begin, Luke believed Christians had nothing to fear from Rome, neither did Rome have anything to fear from Christians. They should be able to peacefully co-exist.

That seems to be why he starts his birth narrative with a decree from Caesar Augustus. Rome actually was responsible for Jesus being born in Bethlehem - the city of David - and not in the back-water town of Nazareth. A representative of the Empire, along with angels and shepherds, gives us a hint about who this child is and will become. A lot of reflection went into today’s gospel pericope.

I often wonder about people’s reaction at the actual time Jesus was born. Most “in the locker-room” would have seen no significance in the event. That would come only during the biblical “press conference.”

Perhaps that’s why we Christians have yet to transform our world as the risen Jesus intends it to be transformed. We fail to notice the significance of our everyday, humdrum lives.

What a waste of a lifetime! Will it take 80 years for someone to eventually look back and discover what each of us could have done to change our world? Maybe we should start the reflection process right here and now.

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