

JULY 31, 2011: EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 55:1-3 Romans 8:35,37-39 Matthew 14:13-21

I've always struggled with "Mass stipends." Paying for a sacred action runs counter to all I've learned about my faith. The Eucharist is a "holy" action; far beyond anything we humans can control with money.

The "official" answer laid on me when I complain about the practice goes something like this: "We don't pay for a Mass. We just pay on the 'occasion' of a Mass." I'm reminded that the graces which come from any one Mass are infinite. They're applied equally to every person who ever lived. The individual who "pays" for the Mass receives no more benefits than a pagan out in a jungle somewhere who's never even heard of Jesus of Nazareth. We Catholics give stipends simply because we're a generous folk. There's absolutely no connection between the money we give and the graces we (or the Mass-intentioned individuals) receive.

This answer reminds me of the free newspaper in our area which sends out yearly subscription requests. The publisher reportedly receives thousands of dollars in subscriptions for a paper which is thrown on peoples' front lawns (wanted or unwanted) every Wednesday morning.

Today's readings cut through such ecclesiastical doubletalk. "All you who are thirsty," Deutero-Isaiah proclaims, "come to the water! You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat; come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk! Why spend your money for what is not bread; your wages for what fails to satisfy?"

As we know from Elisha's healing of Naaman in II Kings, to be paid for performing an act of God is to claim the paid human agent is responsible for the act, not God. Deutero-Isaiah couldn't be clearer: the good Yahweh is about to shower on the exiled Israelites won't cost them one red shekel.

This same mind-set about God's generosity is behind Paul's oft-repeated question, "What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? No, in all these things, we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us." Nothing, not even money, can stop God from loving us through Jesus.

At first glance it might appear Matthew's Jesus alone gives a practical demonstration of that divine love and care in our miraculous feeding pericope. But listen carefully to the passage. Jesus tells his followers, "Give them some food yourselves!" They, not he, do the actual feeding. Jesus does only three things: he first overcomes his disciples' logical objections to his plan, next, he blesses the paltry amount of food they produce; finally, "he (gives) the loaves and fish to the disciples who in turn give them to the crowds." Jesus takes responsibility for the instigation and the blessing. His followers are responsible for the actual feeding of the crowd. They are the ones who freely distribute God's love.

The most significant aspect of this passage comes from recognizing that, like all gospel bread references, it has something to do with the Eucharist. (If there's any doubt, John has Jesus institute the Eucharist not during the Last Supper, but during his chapter 6 miraculous feeding.) Though we, like Jesus' disciples, might protest our inability to take care of others' needs, Matthew tells us it's during the celebration of the Lord's Supper that we, with Jesus' blessing can best offer that care, and there that people can expect to receive it.

Early Christian Eucharists were celebrated in the context of an entire community meal, making it far easier to care for peoples' needs. But through the centuries we've structured our Eucharists in such a way that they've become just a "one man show." (No wonder only the priest receives the stipend.)

If the early church had Mass stipends, the whole community would have had to share in the wealth.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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FOSIL, BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

AUGUST 7, 2011: NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF THE
YEAR I Kings 19:19a, 11-13a Romans 9:1-5 Matthew 14:22-

33

Before the Vatican II reform of the lectionary in 1970, we Catholics only heard readings from the Hebrew Scriptures during the weekdays of Lent. Our Sunday liturgies were Hebrew Scripture-free-zones.

It's a shame we've only heard today's first reading every third year for the past 40 years. The theology it conveys could have helped Jesus' followers through the centuries understand a unique dimension of God working in their lives. But one must go beyond our actual liturgical selection to surface its message. The narrative begins long before the first verses of our reading, and ends several verses after our reading finishes.

Elijah isn't just strolling around the Sinai one day and decides to stop by Mt. Horeb (Mt. Sinai). He's running for his life. Queen Jezebel has put a contract out on him. The prophet began running at Mt. Carmel, in the north of Israel, eventually reaching Beersheba, at the far south of the country. There Yahweh twice gives him food and water, enabling him to continue his trek into the Sinai where today's passage kicks in.

Homilists frequently stress that Yahweh speaks to Elijah in a "tiny, whispering sound," pointing out that we're often not quiet enough to hear God's voice in our daily lives. Yet there's more to the narrative than just the softness of God's voice. Don't you wonder what Yahweh has to say to this faithful servant in that tiny, whispering voice? To everyone's surprise, including Elijah's, Yahweh's not pleased that the prophet's there. God sends the prophet back north with the command to get rid of Jezebel, no matter the consequences.

Though unexpected, Yahweh's words make sense. Since prophets are the conscience of the people, they can never count on being safe and secure. They're always expected to be in the middle of the action, receiving flak and threats from all sides.

I presume all of us have discovered that at times we've also gone down roads God doesn't want us to travel. But there's one big problem in Elijah's case: by twice sending the angel with food at Beersheba, Yahweh actually helped the prophet go to a place Yahweh didn't want him to be! This brings up a dimension of God rarely discussed in catechism class: what part does God play in our misdirected steps? God's obviously present and working in our lives even when we're going the wrong way. It seems the key to eventually getting back on the right path revolves around never breaking our concentration on God.

That's the main message in today's gospel pericope. When Peter stops looking at the one who called him to abandon the security of his boat and begins to notice "how strong the wind is," he starts to sink. Once he breaks his focus on Jesus he runs into problems. It's in this situation that Jesus utters those well-known words: "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" Lack of focus is equated with sinking.

I've no doubt Paul, not just in today's Roman's reading, but also on other occasions, reflected on the steps he'd taken outside both the security of Judaism and even some tried and true practices of Christianity. Would he, like Elijah, one day discover he'd gone the wrong direction by first becoming a follower of Jesus, and then disregarding the early church practice of baptizing only Jews. The risen Jesus had certainly helped him go down both roads. But could he still be heading in the wrong direction? He has no choice but to focus on Jesus. Sinking is not an option.

Many of us priests forget that when the sacrament of reconciliation was reformed in 1974, confessors were instructed not so much to zero in on the penitent's individual sins as to help him or her reflect on where their faith is leading them. Can't think of a better day to start such a reflection than today. As long as we have the proper focus, we should have nothing to worry about.

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