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Ever-evolving salvation history

Roger Karban | Apr. 28, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

One of the most helpful concepts to enter our religious thought and vocabulary in the mid-?60s was ?salvation history.? It dovetailed with the happenings of Vatican II, helping us understand we were part of an ongoing process by which God, through Jesus, was saving the world. Scripture was emphasized more than ever. In those writings we surface the beginnings of that history. So it was only logical when our new Lectionary came out in 1970 that the first of the weekend readings was usually from the Hebrew scriptures. If nothing else, those rarely heard passages helped us place Jesus more firmly in his historical, Jewish environment, an essential element in understanding God?s actions on our behalf throughout history.

Sunday after Easter

Acts 2:14, 36-41

1 John 3:1-2

John 10:11-18

Full text of the readings [1]

Since we were encouraged to look at our salvation as a process -- an ongoing phenomenon -- we weren?t disturbed to discover that our ancestors in the faith didn?t receive that faith in one, big, tidy package. They continually evolved in their understanding of God?s relationship with them. In the earliest writings of the Hebrew scriptures, for instance, there?s no belief in Yahweh as the only God. There was a period when they even limited Yahweh?s power to just the Promised Land. Take one step over the border and you're in another god?s territory and domain. And something we today regard essential to our faith -- belief in an afterlife -- didn?t enter Jewish thought until about 100 years before Jesus? birth.

Anyone who studies Paul?s letters and the four Gospels is familiar with two basic changes. Within two generations, the Christian community shifted from being a short-term into a long- term movement. Jesus? delayed Parousia forced that change. During the same period, Gentiles began to outnumber Jews in most churches. What had begun as a Jewish reform movement eventually morphed into a Gentile-based religion.

But another transition took place even before our sacred writings were composed. The great 20th-century Bible scholar Rudolf Bultmann put it this way: ?After Jesus? death and resurrection, the preacher became the preached.? In other words, during his earthly ministry Jesus went from town to town, synagogue to synagogue preaching the kingdom of God. But after Easter Sunday, his followers began preaching Jesus. He became their message.

Today?s Gospel provides us with an example of that important transition. Jesus? good shepherd metaphor seems to have gone through at least two redactions. We find the original context of his shepherd simile in Luke 15.

Jesus directs it to his enemies -- the scribes and Pharisees -- who object to sinners ?drawing near to listen to him.? He responds by reminding them that even shepherds are concerned for the lost.

Matthew gives the same metaphor in Chapter 18, but Jesus isn?t speaking to his critics, but to his disciples. He employs it to remind them never ?to despise one of these little ones.?

Today?s Gospel provides us with the third step. Referring to his sacrificial death, John?s (risen) Jesus can now state, ?I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.? He, not just his preaching, has become the center of our faith. Salvation history has taken a significant turn.

Our Acts passage provides us with another. Peter and John cured the crippled man ?in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.? Biblically speaking, to do something in someone?s name is to do it in the place of that person. Just as Jesus healed people, so the disciples of Jesus in Acts heal people. They?re carrying on his ministry. They?ve become other Christs!

His followers began their discipleship by simply having faith in Jesus. But when they ?did the Jesus thing? they eventually discovered they were beginning to share the faith of Jesus. They were motivated by the same spirit that motivated him.

It?s clear from our 1 John reading that we can always expect our faith to evolve. ?Beloved,? the author writes, ?we are God?s children now, what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.?

Our sacred authors agree: No matter how much our theologies have changed over the centuries, and can be expected to change in the future, our relationship with God is essential. And as any married couple will attest, relationships evolve, or they die.

[Roger Vermalen Karban is a priest of the Belleville, Ill., diocese and pastor of Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish in Renault, Ill.]

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