

Crossing over

Roger Karban | Feb. 23, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

Rudolph Bultmann once described our sacred writers as people who had glimpses of the "other side," but wrote for people "on this side."

Though they admire the well-known scholar's insights, most Scripture experts today would disagree with the last half of Bultmann's statement. Certainly people who have had no experience of the other side read their writings -- anybody can read the Bible -- but these special authors originally wrote for people who had also visited the other side, who had personally touched an awesome God and lived to tell others about it.



It's precisely because those experiences are so important and memorable that our sacred writers frequently employ "mythical" language to describe them. Myth here doesn't refer to a story or statement that isn't true, but to something so unique and significant that it can only be expressed in symbolic language.

Philippians 3:17-19
Luke 9:28-36
We typically employ myth when we're talking about the most meaningful events in our lives. For instance, I can ask you three questions about your marriage. You can answer the first two in simple, factual terms; the third always demands some myth. When were you married? Where were you married? What does it mean for you to be married? If you begin your third response with, "It's like," or "It reminds me of," or "Have you ever," you're crossing over into myth. You're reaching into symbolism to connect your experiences with those of the questioner.

Our sacred authors are often forced to do the same. Today's Gospel pericope provides us with the classic Christian biblical myth: Jesus' transfiguration.

Luke's Jesus is just 20 verses away from beginning his momentous journey to Jerusalem, a trip that will not only take up over half the Gospel, but will eventually result in his suffering, death and resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit. The evangelist presumes every follower of Jesus, moved by the Holy Spirit, will join him in experiencing the same phenomena. They're both the price and the reward of discipleship. Like Jesus, Luke's readers are constantly on that road of dying and rising.

All of us have seen something special in particular individuals that wasn't evident to the naked eye. You once noticed that uniqueness in your significant other. But remember how hard it was to convey that insight to your parents when you brought him or her home? I presume they didn't instantly see what you saw.

Jesus' initial followers saw something in this itinerant preacher. They were convinced he was more than just a Capernaum carpenter who had shuttered his business and started traveling to neighboring villages and synagogues, sharing his insights into God's kingdom among us. Gradually they began to be convinced that those who touched Jesus were actually touching God.

That's why Luke positions the glorified Jesus between Moses and Elijah. The evangelist tells his readers that Jesus is at the center of what the Scriptures convey.

What's the subject of their conversing? The exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem. Just as the ancient Israelites had been freed from slavery by going on the original Exodus, so Jesus' disciples will be freed from whatever enslaves them by accompanying him to Jerusalem.

Why does Peter suggest building three tents? When post-Exodus Israelites felt hard-pressed and prayed to Yahweh to help them overcome their troubles, they often conceived of that help as a return to Yahweh's presence in the Exodus. God would return and once again be part of their daily lives. And, as in those glorious days of old, they'd again live in tents and have Yahweh close at hand. In other words, Jesus' followers eventually dared to believe that he was Yahweh among them. The account is a very memorable, mythical way of expressing essential Christian beliefs and insights.

Yet it's clear from today's Philippians passage that not all faith insights are lasting, no matter what myths we employ to express them. Paul's "enemies of the cross" seem to be Christians who've stopped focusing on the risen Jesus in their lives and have returned to keeping the Mosaic dietary laws. Instead of the Christ, "Their God is their stomach."

Though students of Bultmann appreciated his attempts to "demythologize" Scripture, most eventually came to the conclusion that those for whom those writings were originally composed had to go one step further: to "re-mythologize" the text. Whatever has to do with the other side can only be properly understood on this side if it's put into myths that mirror our own experiences.

Perhaps our homilists should spend more time developing their myth-making than their locution.

[Fr. Roger Vermalen Karban is pastor of Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish in Renault, Ill.]

Source URL (retrieved on 02/01/2015 - 13:58): <http://ncronline.org/blogs/spiritual-reflections/crossing-over>