

The long haul

Roger Karban | Jun. 22, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

One of the easiest ways to learn the uniqueness of any evangelist is to compare his final work with the sources he employed. That's difficult to do with Mark and John, but it's certainly easier when we're dealing with Matthew and Luke.

Our traditional image of the evangelists at work was four men sitting in front of a blank piece of papyrus, pen in hand, with a dove nearby. We presumed our Gospel writers were eyewitnesses to the historical Jesus' ministry, and, in their old age, they composed a history of what they saw and heard, aided by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.



Modern scholarship tells us the writing process wasn't that simple.

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First, none of our evangelists knew the historical Jesus. We have nothing written by anyone who accompanied the itinerant preacher from Capernaum who, toward the end of the first third of the first Christian century, went around towns and synagogues preaching the advent of the "kingdom of God." Rather, the evangelists are second- and third-generation disciples of the risen Jesus, trying to convey to four different communities the implications of imitating him/her. They're not biographers of a former Galilean carpenter.

Second, the evangelists employed sources, mostly writings compiled by other followers of Jesus, which they copied and often changed to convey their own unique theologies. Though scholars debate the possible sources used by Mark and John, almost all agree that when Matthew and Luke composed their Gospels, they had before them two manuscripts: Mark and a text called "Q" (from the German word *quelle*, or "source") that contained many of Jesus' sayings. They copied much of what Mark had written, but added the say-ings from Q, a manuscript we presume once existed but was lost. Though it's difficult to reconstruct Q, because we have Mark we can tell how Matthew and Luke used but also altered his Gospel to convey their own insights about the significance of the risen Jesus.

Today's Gospel passage provides us a classic example of evangelistic redaction, or editing. Luke copied Mark's account of Jesus' command to carry our cross so exactly that most of us never notice he inserted one extra

word. "Those who wish to follow me," Luke's Jesus insists, "must deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow me." That added word, daily, is extremely significant.

Luke seems to be the first Christian author to presume Jesus' Parousia won't take place in his or his readers' lifetime. He uses both his Gospel and his Acts of the Apostles to pre-prepare his community for the long haul. He's coaching distance runners, not sprinters. As we hear in his account of Stephen's death in Acts 7:54-56, we don't have to wait until Jesus' glorious arrival to enter into the joys he promised. Stephen sees Jesus already coming for him at the moment of death. In that instant, each disciple experiences his or her personal Parousia.

For Luke, the dying/rising that Jesus expects of his imitators isn't a once-a-lifetime event; it's an ongoing day-by-day experience. Every day we're to walk along the special path God has set for us, a path God didn't completely reveal to us yesterday.

Our Zechariah reading presumes some of God's followers have often gone down the wrong path. People of faith constantly need to reform how their faith is lived.

That's where Paul's Galatians passage fits into our other two readings.

Though we're always anxious to know what Jesus said and did during his earthly life, that's not always the Jesus we encounter in the Christian Scriptures. Because our sacred authors experienced only the risen Jesus, they expect their communities to surface and imitate that Jesus in their daily lives.

Many Jewish converts in Galatia insisted that Gentile Christians first become Jews. They had either ignored or forgotten Paul's commitment to the risen Jesus. Paul encountered a "new creation" on the road to Damascus: someone freed from the limitations re-restricting all of us to a specific gender, culture and religion. That's why Paul doesn't restrict Christianity to Jews, anymore than he restricts it to free men. There are no preconditions. All are welcome; all can become other Christs.

The biblically formed preacher must constantly make the assembly aware not only of the Palestinian Jesus who lived in the first third of the first Christian century, but, more importantly, of the Jesus living in our midst today: the risen Jesus who can't be identified with one race, religion or gender.

If, for instance, we're concerned with properly reverencing Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, we must also reverence Jesus present in one another. There's no end to the implications of such a faith.

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