

We die with him

Roger Karban | Sep. 16, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

Gospels aren't biographies of Jesus. These four writings are a unique genre. Except for the Elijah/Elisha cycles in 1 and 2 Kings, we've nothing quite like them in all of biblical literature.



Not only were Gospels never intended to be Jesus histories, neither were they

composed to entice prospective converts to buy into the Christians faith. Like all Scripture, they were written to help readers understand the faith they already had, not give them faith. The authors' task was to provide implications of history, not present the history itself.

Mark 8:27-35

To accomplish this goal, our evangelists felt free to arrange their narratives of the historical Jesus' ministry in ways that best conveyed the meaning of that ministry. For example, they created entire chapters of conflict stories, miracles or parables, artificially grouping Jesus' actions and words by theme.

Today's Gospel passage gives us a classic example of such artificiality. It is Mark's response to a question Christians deal with every day: How do we die with Jesus?

Paul tells us only those who die with Jesus will rise with Jesus. But how do we pull this off? Do we actually arrange to have ourselves scourged, nails pounded in our wrists and feet, and raised up on a cross? None of Jesus' first followers died in the same physical way he died. On the contrary, they were convinced his physical death was simply the culmination of lots of psychological deaths he'd undergone throughout his life and ministry. Mark knows that few of Jesus' followers will suffer physical deaths because of their discipleship. But he's convinced everyone can imitate his psychological deaths.

Mark demonstrates how we're to die with Jesus in three successive chapters. The first is today's reading; the next two in chapters 9 and 10. (Find them by going to verse 30 in each chapter.) The evangelist begins each narrative with Jesus predicting his suffering, death and resurrection. Someone then says or does something that shows they've completely misunderstood what it means to die. Finally, Jesus corrects the misunderstanding, showing what dying with him really entails.

Mark creates a pattern in the three prediction/misunderstanding/clarification to come. In today's narrative,

Peter, who has just acknowledged Jesus as "the Christ," is given the initial role of "misunderstander." "He [Peter] took him aside and began to rebuke him."

Jesus' harsh command, "Get behind me, Satan!" follows Mark's comment that Jesus first turned and looked at his disciples. He wants to nip Peter's misunderstanding in the bud before it infects his whole community.

Scholars remind us that, in this context, "Satan" may not refer to the devil but to the original Hebrew meaning of the word indicating an obstacle in someone's path. It's also important to understand that, in Greek, a disciple literally is someone who follows behind another. Mark's original readers probably would have heard Jesus say, "Stop being an obstacle to my ministry, Peter! Get out from in front of me! Get behind me; be a disciple! Do what I do, not what you'd like me to do!"

One more point, in Mark's clarification section many scholars believe it unlikely the historical Jesus would have said, "Carry your cross!" before his own crucifixion. He probably said, "Carry your tau!" The tau -- a "T" -- is the Hebrew alphabet's last letter, sometimes employed by pious Jews (and St. Francis of Assisi) as a sign they were willing to do whatever Yahweh asked of them. Just as we say we're going to do something from A to Z, they'd say they'd do it from aleph to tau. Or they'd just abbreviate their determination by announcing they'd do it to the tau.

For Mark, being open, willing to carry out whatever God asks of us, is the first step in dying with Jesus, the first step in becoming another Christ.

No reading from the Hebrew Scriptures better dovetails with our Gospel than today's Deutero-Isaiah passage. But for some unknown reason, the first part of verse 4 has been left out: "Yahweh God has given me a well-trained tongue, that I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them. Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear ..."

Carroll Stuhlmueller always mentioned that this verse provides Scripture's best definition of a disciple of God: someone who hits the floor every morning listening to what new thing -- which of the works in the second reading from James -- God is calling them to do that day.

Unfortunately, no one's ears are ever completely open. It's a lifelong process.

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