

April 24, 2008 - Easter Sunday, Vigil Mass (A)

Readings for the Easter Vigil (Cycle A):

1. Service of Readings and Psalms ending with
2. Romans 6.3-11
Psalm 118.1-2, 16-17, 22-23 Response: "Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia."
3. Matthew 28:1-10 [Note: At Masses during the day the reading is usually from John 20.1-9.]

Reflections on the Sunday Gospel Reading

by Bill Hunt

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In Matthew's Gospel the resurrection is the ultimate sign of God's vindication of Jesus' honor as the Son of God. Raising Jesus from the dead was God's answer to the brutal punishment and mockery to which Jesus was subjected in an attempt to destroy his reputation and to intimidate his followers. Perhaps this is why both the angel and the risen Jesus tell the two Marys that they have nothing to fear.

The Resurrection is also God's answer to Jesus' only words from the cross in Matthew's Gospel: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Far from forsaking Jesus, God rewards his obedience with a triumph over death itself.

Still, Matthew's story of Jesus' resurrection contains a puzzling element. The assault on Jesus' honor was very public. Matthew tells us that four different groups of people challenged Jesus' honor by mocking him while he hung on the cross: 1) the soldiers of the Roman governor who "placed over his head the written charge against him: This is Jesus, the King of the Judeans;" 2) the passers-by; 3) the chief priests with the scribes and the elders; and 4) the two revolutionaries crucified with him. They all ridiculed his claim to be the Son of God.

In the honor/shame culture of Jesus' time a public insult called for a public response. A private response to a public insult was no response at all, no vindication. Yet, in Matthew's Gospel the vindication is very private. Only the two women and the eleven disciples actually see the risen Lord. How, then, is the resurrection a vindication of Jesus' honor?

To answer this question we have to take into account the implied audience of Matthew's entire Gospel - all of us who read or listen to his account. We are the ultimate public who witness both the shaming of Jesus and his vindication by God.

Peter put it well in his speech to Cornelius and his family.

We are witnesses to all that [Jesus] did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, **not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God**

as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.
He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead." (Acts 10.39-42 NRSV)

Faith in the risen Lord, then, is not the result of disinterested observation or scientific calculation. Faith is our response to the witness of the women and men disciples of Jesus coming down to us through the centuries in the Church. They challenge us to make Jesus' vindication public. We are the ones who are called to reverse the scandal of the cross. We who eat and drink with the risen Lord in the Eucharist reverse the shame of the cross by the witness of our lives and by our proclamation of the good news that God has raised Jesus from the dead.

The resurrection, then, is not an event that ended in the distant past. It is a reality that continues in the present, our present. "Jesus Christ is risen today!"

In preparing these reflections, in addition to the biblical texts, I consulted the following works:

Harrington 1991 - Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina Series Volume 1, A Michael Glazier Book (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. 408-413.

Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992 - Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 165-169.

Meier 1990 - John P. Meier, *Matthew*, A Michael Glazier Book [1980] (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), pp. 359-364

Neyrey 1998 - Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 139-162.

Senior 1998 - Donald Senior, *Matthew*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 339-343.