

Epiphany 4A, Sunday,

Readings: Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Psalm 19, 1 Corinthians: 12: 12-31a, Luke 4: 14-21

Jubilee Rescue

Introduction

The story of the rescue of the 16 survivors of the crashed flight, FAU 571 in Mendoza Province of north-west Argentina, is thrilling. Discovered, only because two of the survivors, Nando Parrado and Roberto Canessa, finally breached the mountain chain and literally walked to Chile for help, the experience spoke not just of human resilience, but Christian faith and courage. Indeed, the religious nature of the event was well and truly reflected in the words of Canessa, when he said, "The arrival of the helicopters was like a theophany of God". So, let's begin with the word "theophany". Why begin our thinking there and what does it mean anyway?

A theophany is the word used in Christian discourse to refer to the presence of God, perhaps the "outbreak" of God in human reality. What marks, characterizes theophanies in the Bible is the experience of liberation, of freedom. When Canessa spoke of the arrival of the rescue helicopters as a theophany, he was close to biblical thinking: he and his friends were being rescued from nature that had turned against them. But theophanies in the Bible refer to more than just the rescue from a hostile nature. In fact, the appearance of God in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, has to do most of all with rescuing human beings from the mess they have created, from situations of social dysfunction, injustice and violence.

So, when we read the Bible through the lens of theophanies, we almost always find that they have to do with calling human beings out from oppressive situations to freedom situations. Let's look at some examples. To begin with, in the early part of the Hebrew Bible, there is the theophany or appearance of God (Yahweh) in the burning bush. What happens here? Moses, a very ordinary young man who can barely speak without a stutter, is called to challenge the pharaoh, demanding the release, the rescue of his people from oppression. But there are other theophanies as well. Soon after Moses' experience, we hear of the theophany or appearance of the pillar of cloud, which leads the Hebrew slaves to escape their suffering (Exodus), through the sea to freedom. And there is yet another theophany: that of God (Yahweh) on Mt Sinai, delivering to Moses the Ten Commandments, which serves as a sort of glue, to keep the several conflictive tribal groups (the amphictyony) together, as they walk to freedom. And finally, in the New Testament, Jesus himself is *the* theophany, the authoritative appearance of God, taking the side of human beings in their struggle for life and meaning. Indeed, one of the early Church Fathers, Eusebius of Caesarea, wrote a little book precisely on this idea, called "*Peri theophaneias*" - "Divine Manifestation", about the Incarnation, the birth of Jesus, as the theophany of God.

So, what we can conclude is this: that theophanies in the Bible always disturb, upset unsatisfactory situations, upturning them, rescuing people and societies, generating new better realities.

The Gospel

In our reading today from the Gospel, we see and hear another theophany: an unambiguous authoritative presence of God, as Jesus appears in the synagogue in his home town, and reads from the prophet Isaiah.

Let's register a number of points:

First, that in keeping with what we have said already: this manifesto of God through Jesus, is disturbing. This platform, challenges, upsets the usual social and political relations of ancient authoritarian Eastern societies. This policy, up-ends "top down arrangements" in favour of

“bottom up arrangements”. This is not “good news” for everyone and evokes the liberating idea buried in ancient Hebrew theology of the Jubilee Year

Second, the Jubilee, from which Jesus draws as inspiration, comes from Hebrew history, and was an attempt to “level the playing field”, ensuring that extremes of inequality did not fester or grow. The Hebrew vision, included, several prescriptions to be enacted every 50 years. They were these” leaving the soil fallow, so that nature might recuperate; freeing people from their financial debts; liberating people who had fallen into the institution of slavery, and the return to each individual of his family’s property, which he may have lost.

Third, it is in the context of God’s Jubilee vision for society, that the terms, the words of our reading, take new life. In my experience, leading Christians through biblical texts like this one, I have noted how we almost always, spiritualize the words. So, for this reading, we remove it from its immediate social context, and neutralize it, interpreting it in metaphorical ways. But that is not what this theophany is about. It is really, in your face, it is confronting, it means what it says. When it speaks of release of prisoners (the word *aphesis*), it means release, freedom. When it speaks of the poor (*ptochoi*) that is what it means: the destitute, the beggars that lived on every corner.

Fourth, Jesus clearly understands that in his presence, in his life, in his spirit, these are the changes that are to be put into action. The words at the end of the reading are not for the faint-hearted, “This passage of Scripture has come true today, as you have heard it being read”.

The Reality

God’s theophany then is always rescuing, freeing, liberating. But and this is the point I want to conclude with: it is never done alone. God’s passion to rescue, God’s zeal for freedom, requires our co-operation, our partnership, just as it did, that of Moses, and others through history.

Either we take Jesus’ manifesto of rescue, seriously or we don’t. God is either God of Jubilee, or God is not. If we say yes, then we are bound to have the courage to be God’s partners. In attempting to build Jubilee, to build the Kingdom.