

Matthias and BB King – Ascension Day/Easter7B

Ascension Day, which officially occurred on Thursday, is established to commemorate the taking up of Jesus – after he awoke from being dead – to heaven, to live forever with God until the end of time. The Ascension is, of course a crucial element of the Christian story because if Jesus had not ascended, he ought to be still around somewhere in the flesh – still on the road, still touring, or living in Caracas, or Carpinteria, or Kathmandu. As the story goes, Jesus left his mortal existence to take on a purely spiritual one – to become the Christ -- and is alive and well in the hearts and minds and hands of people everywhere.

Sometimes its hard to keep track of every commemorative day in the Christian calendar because the Gospel is with us day in and day out in its entirety. Every day is one of incarnation, transfiguration, atonement, crucifixion, resurrection... and also ascension. If any of these events had not taken place, the whole picture would be altered to the point of unrecognition.

Nevertheless, it is meet and right to consider the particular picture on the pertinent day. Thursday was Ascension Day, so let us think about what it might mean to ascend with Christ. Albert Schweitzer said, “It is only an ethical movement that can rescue us from the slough of barbarism, and the ethical comes into existence only in individuals. The final decision as to what the future of a society shall be depends not on how near its organization is to perfection, but on the degrees of worthiness of its individual members. That is why it is the duty of individuals to rise to a higher conception of their capabilities and undertake again the function that only the individual can perform: that of producing new spiritual-ethical ideas,” close quote. This is what is meant by picking up our cross and

following Jesus. This enterprise is the "Imitation of Christ." This is our Great Commission, which undertaking can give meaning to our lives.

Matthias was the Apostle chosen as a replacement following Judas Iscariot's betrayal and subsequent suicide. There is no mention of Matthias in the Gospels, but according to *Acts*, he had been a follower since the time of Jesus' baptism by John until the Ascension. Peter proposed nominating two possible choices to replace Judas, then all the assembly prayed, then they cast lots and the lot fell to Matthias. So he was numbered with the Eleven and was present with them at the Pentecost. In other words, they flipped a coin, and Matthias picked up his cross.

No further words about Matthias are to be found in the New Testament, but there is a wild array of conflicting information from other sources: The Syriac version of Eusebius refers to him as "Tolmai." Clement of Alexandria says some identified him with Zacchaeus; but the *Clementine Recognitions* say he's really Barnabas; meanwhile, Hilgenfeld thinks he is the same as Nathanael in the Gospel of John. The tradition of the Greeks holds that St. Matthias planted the faith in Cappadocia and along the coast of the Caspian Sea, residing near the port Issus. According to Nicephorus, Matthias first preached the Gospel in Judaea, then in the region of Colchis, now part of modern-day Georgia and was there reported to have been stoned to death as a martyr. Although he may have just been exhausted.

On the other hand, the *Synopsis of Dorotheus* records: "Matthias preached the Gospel to barbarians and meat-eaters in the interior of Ethiopia, around the sea harbor of Hyssus, at the mouth of the river Phasis. He died at Sebastopolis, and was buried there, near the Temple of the Sun." Yet another

tradition maintains that Matthias was stoned at Jerusalem; while according to Hippolytus of Rome, Matthias died in Jerusalem, but of old age. Fragments of the lost Gospel of Matthias survive, which early Church Fathers dismissed as false and heretical material in the 2nd century. So we're not exactly clear on Matthias: who he was, what he did and how he ended up. His significance boils down to this sentence: "He took his place among the Eleven." Because that is all any of us can do.

Fast-forward to November 1941, USA. "King Biscuit Time" went on the air on station KFFA, out of Helena, Ark. It was the first show to feature the Mississippi Delta blues, and a young sharecropper named Riley King heard it on his lunch break at the plantation. A largely self-taught guitarist, he now knew what he wanted to be when he grew up: a musician on the air. That was his cross, and he picked it up.

King Biscuit Time featured Rice Miller, a primeval bluesman and one of two performers who worked under the name Sonny Boy Williamson. King, then 22, went to see Miller in Memphis, looking for work. Beale Street, lay 130 miles north of Berclair, MS – just outside Itta Bena – where King was born, and to him, Memphis looked like a world capital. Mr. Miller had two performances booked that night, one in Memphis and one in Mississippi. He handed the lower-paying nightclub job to Mr. King. It paid \$12.50. Mr. King was making about \$5 a day on the plantation. He never returned to his tractor, according to the *Times*.

The late, great Riley B. King, who came to be known as "Blues Boy," or "B.B." for short, carried his music around the world with grace, passion and persistence. We aren't all gifted with the kind of artistic genius of a B.B. King, but each of us does have the opportunity to carry whatever gifts we do have

out into the world with grace, with passion and with persistence; this is how we take our place among the Eleven. BB said, "I tried to connect my singing voice to my guitar and my guitar to my singing voice, like the two was talking to one another." In other words, he sought to integrate himself. What a simple but glorious purpose, to have our hands do what our hearts desire; or as the old Scottish saying goes, "May your pulse beat as your heart would wish it."

"I am the true vine, and God is the vine grower. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches." Jesus sends the disciples out as individuals with the power to heal. He proclaims, explains and maintains that our individual recognition of the reality that all will be well, that our redeemer lives and God is with us even to the end of the age frees our fantasies of virtues attained and celebrated; frees our dreams of goodness, connectedness and integration, allowing them to become the realities of our lives lived, our living sacrifice, our spiritual worship. We are to look inside ourselves, accept what gifts are ours and be at peace so that we can go out and be healers in a struggling world, can yield the fruit of charity in our due season.

Said BB, "I never wanted to be like other (blues singers). I might like hearing them play, but I never wanted to be anyone other than myself. There are a few people I've wished I could play like, but when I tried, it didn't work." When we embrace our own singularity amidst the multitudes of people, allow our own gifts and opportunities to lift our own voices in song and prayer and protest, and raise our own hands in creativity, industry and charity, our leaves shall never wither, the books of our lives will continue to grow just as long as the prayers we

offer and the deeds we do echo in the prayers and the lives of those we come to love.

Each day we may be satisfied a little, but often we may be disappointed too – in the world and in ourselves – for what is left undone at the day’s end. But the love of God assures us that what’s important is not so much what we have done – or left undone – but what we’re aiming to do next, that matters most. (For some, this seems like more of a relief than others!)

But for those who have been given the gift of the desire for self-knowledge, humility and usefulness, this enduring love of love allows us to be – whatever else we are – joyful, thoughtful and helpful human beings. We become less afraid of insignificance and vulnerability, more willing – when challenged, criticized or threatened – to ask whether those who disagree with us are pertinent and right and thus valuable instead of finding them unwelcome and upsetting because their criticism of us is true. Old or young, we become more teachable, more resilient, more tolerant of ourselves and others, more willing to extend ourselves for the sake of love.

Let’s let BB have the last words: “You only live but once, and when you’re died you’re done, so let the good times roll.”

“When I do eventually drop, I pray to God it’ll happen in one of three ways. Firstly, on stage or leaving the stage, then secondly in my sleep. And the third way? You’ll have to figure that out for yourself.”

“I never use that word, ‘Retire...there are so many sounds I still want to make, so many things I haven’t yet done.”