

Weekly Reading – Monday, January 11, 2010

We are looking now at the lessons for the Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 17, 2010. It is customary for the lectionary, to follow the account of the baptism of Jesus from the Gospel of the Year (last Sunday), to move this week to John, and so we do. We will then return to Luke for the remainder of the Sundays after Epiphany, which aren't very many as Lent begins on February 17.

Isaiah 62: 1 - 5

This is one of those wonderful Third Isaiah texts of hope and promise that seems to fit so well the radiant and promising season of Epiphany. The news is so good that it can't be kept to oneself but must be told, so (verse 1) "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent . . ." It is news of vindication, revelation, and restoration. Verse 4: "You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her." Talk about upbeat! For worship planners, an alternative to a simple reading of this text would be to use it as a responsorial Act of Praise. (If you do remember the way Hebrew poetry works, with the "a" line being repeated by the following "b." The leader should speak "a" with the congregation saying "b." Often people will assign an a/b to one voice, then the next a/b to the next voice, which effectively deadens the poetry) Communicating such hope and promise seems crucial to personal, congregational or community change. It can't be just "rah-rah," but if change is to take place among discouraged or hopeless people, it happens because someone believes that for them change, renewal, restoration, and a new day can really come. Often we think that prophets are only in the judgment or critique business. Here the business of the prophet is deep hope.

I Corinthians 12: 1 - 11

Always at the this time of the liturgical year there is a series of readings from the Corinthian correspondence as the epistle lesson. This year we start late in I Corinthians, in chapter 12, where Paul is concerned with spiritual gifts in the body of Christ, the church. Against the backdrop of the entire letter where the issues include congregational division borne of the feeling on the part of some that their gifts are superior while those of others are either no-count or inferior, this reading continues Paul's theme of unity and harmony in the Body. Paul first attributes gifts to the workings of the Holy Spirit, thus reminding people that spiritual gifts are not a sign of a person's own spirituality or spiritual attainments. They are gifts given to build up the Body of Christ, the church. They are not for personal glory or self-aggrandizement. In verse 4 and following Paul does a brilliant job of what today is called "polarity management." He manages the polarity of unity and diversity, holding the tension that is necessary between two important values. It's not all about unity nor is it all about diversity. It's both/ and not either/ or. (When my kids were teens I remember saying to them, "You are indeed very special, and you are part of a family." Both/ and) "There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit." Thus there is diversity (not fractious disarray) and there is unity (but not uniformity). Each believer is gifted, but for the purpose of contributing to the whole, to the common good. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." So this passage cuts in a number of helpful ways: reminding those who think they have no

gifts that the Spirit gives gifts of different types to all believers; reminding those who see themselves as super-gifted or really special that they are part of the Body and their gifts are to serve a common good.

John 2: 1 - 11

Certainly an Epiphany text, as Jesus reveals his glory. Among the many interesting things about this text is that only some see it (Christ's glory). Some see only more and better wine. That's the way it goes with miracles, or as John prefers, "signs." They are ambiguous. They don't prove anything. Some look at the window and see only the window. Some look through the window, the sign, to see the glory of God. This is the first of Jesus' signs, according to John. There will be seven. It's a story full of interesting, somewhat hidden, features that are all important to understanding what's going on and what the evangelist is saying to us. Note first the testy exchange between Jesus and his mother. The point here is that Jesus does not do his miracles/ signs in response to human need or human agendas. They are not about meeting human need (as is true often in the Synoptic gospels). They are moments of revelation, pointing us to the presence and reality of God. Often today, an emphasis on Jesus' compassion has wholly eclipsed any emphasis on revelation or Jesus' divinity. This and other such texts are a welcome corrective. A second note has to do with the implicit critique of religion and ritual. The stone jars are there for the rites of purification, so that when the party ends the righteous can purify themselves. By turning the water of purification into the wine of celebration, Jesus challenges religion and ritual when they become self-serving and empty of God. Third, the quantity of wine, roughly 150 to 180 gallons of the finest wine, is also telling. It's not about filling a short-term need for enough wine. The place is awash in joy juice, of the finest vintage. The grace of God is like that: overwhelming, extravagant, beyond our control. The 1990 film "Babette's Feast" remains a wonderful cinematic parable of the abundance of grace and of its power to transforming. Still, in the end, only a relative few "get it," see glory, see beyond the wine to the Wine.