

## Weekly Reading – Monday, January 25, 2010

Okay, we're looking now at the texts for Sunday, January 31, which is the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, and the fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Epiphany themes of revelation, manifestation, God's message made clear continue. And Jesus is located, as Luke does often, in the line of the prophets.

### Jeremiah 1: 4 - 10

This is the story of the call of Jeremiah to be a prophet, that is, a messenger of God. Like so many of the prophet's who are called in the Bible, Jeremiah was reluctant. He objected, saying to God, "Truly I do not know how to speak." He says that he is only a "boy" (or "youth," depending on the translation). God discerns fear in Jeremiah's response and heart, which is probably a reasonable response on Jeremiah's part. I find it reassuring, somehow, that the Bible's prophets are *reluctant* prophets, that they aren't either too eager or too cocksure. I distrust those would-be prophets who know no doubts, hesitation or reluctance; those who are all-too-sure that they are God's messengers. Jeremiah's ministry will, in time, involve great public struggle and drama, but before the public struggle, there is this private one, before the outer drama the inner one. All the good preachers also have their times of private struggle before they say a public word, and this is a good thing, not a bad thing. An exterior life of substance and integrity requires and is built on a genuine interior life.

### I Corinthians 13: 1 - 13

So famous is this passage, "Paul's hymn to love," and so often read and heard at weddings, that it may seem almost strange to hear it read in the regular course of public worship, amid a series of readings from I Corinthians. "You mean this comes from somewhere? I just thought it was from some wedding book!" Yes, it has a context, a setting, a place, and while it's lovely to hear at a wedding, it is in a sense "out of place" there. (I've sometimes found this an especially powerful and appropriate text for the funeral or memorial service). But before wedding or funeral, the setting of this famous passage is the life of a congregation, the life of a factionalized and quarreling congregation. In addressing such a quarrelsome bunch Paul does not simply say, "Now, now, can't we all just love one another?" What he says is that there are many spiritual gifts, including faith, prophecy, speaking in tongues, self-giving and sacrifice, but they are all hopelessly distorted if they are not guided by, disciplined by and informed by, love. Earlier in this letter Paul offers the wonderful aphorism, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." The point of spirituality is not to puff us up with self-importance, but to build up the church and community, life and other people. So, if we are about to speak in a way we hope to be prophetic, ask "Will this build up the body?" "What are my motives in doing or saying this?"

### Luke 4: 21 - 30

Here we have the second half of a story begun last week, Jesus' inaugural sermon at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. What started well, ends badly as the hometown crowd tries to toss Jesus over a cliff. The perplexing question is, "What happened?" "What went so

badly, and quickly, awry?" Or maybe nothing went awry, maybe this is just how it goes for God's prophets? However one views the conclusion of the story, still the question lingers, "What happened?" "What has so incensed the people against Jesus?" Or to put it a slightly different way, and move to another interpretive level, "What is Luke telling us about Jesus and his ministry?" The set-up is the expectation on the part of the townspeople of Nazareth that their sense of virtue and of being God's special people will be vindicated and confirmed. One of "their own" will assure them that they are special, truly wonderful, and that God has a very special place in God's heart for them while the Almighty is fully prepared to zap those nasty foreigners, outsiders, and generally everyone who is "not us." Jesus however (and this would be an understatement) disappoints such expectations. Instead of a happy reunion with the hometown crowd, his message and its citations to the story of the foreign widow in Sidon and the Syrian general, Na'maan, say that rather than being prepared to blast the "them" (in the us/ them equation) God cares deeply for them too. Jesus may even be saying that God finds it easier to work with "them" than with "us," when we figure we need no change in our own lives because we're already the good people or the in-crowd. So, to return to the beginning of this week's notes, the call of Jeremiah to be a prophet: the true prophet's does not throw red-meat to their own hometown crowd egging on their self-righteous, self-inflated tendencies. The true prophets dismantle the "We're on God's side" certainty and complacency to leave us naked before God's judgment and grace.