

Weekly Reading – Monday, March 22, 2010

This Sunday begins Holy Week with Palm/ Passion Sunday. Preachers and worship planners have choices to make. You can do "Palm Sunday" or "Palm/ Passion Sunday." The latter usually entails a reading of the Passion Story from the gospel of the year, which this year is Luke. I'm going to comment on the appointed lessons for Palm Sunday. The Passion text is Luke 22: 14 - 23: 56. I won't comment on that here, except to say that one option for preaching is to do a teaching sermon that prepares the congregation to hear a dramatic reading of the Passion story by lifting up the particular accents of this year's gospel. Knowing Luke I would imagine those would include, 1) a call to God's people Israel to repent and embrace their vocation rather than resting on their laurels or claiming special privilege, 2) the universal significance of Christ's work and teaching, "for all people," and 3) an emphasis on forgiveness of sin and for sinners, which is the most inclusive category of them all.

Isaiah 50: 4 - 9a

Eschatological ethics on display. The servant of the Lord relies on the Lord, trusting God will come to his help (vs. 7), that the Lord is near (vs. 8), and that he comes (vs. 9). In other words, if you are going to stand against the tide, you've got to be well anchored to someone or something bigger than you. The church has interpreted the story of Jesus, and in particular the cross, through these passages from Isaiah. One of the interesting questions here is triggered by vs. 1, "The Lord Yahweh has given me a disciple's tongue" (JB). What is a disciple's tongue? And then in vs. 2, "Morning by morning he makes my ear alert to listen like a disciple." Disciple's ears . . . what do those look like, how do they function? To be a disciple is to be a student, a learner. So here the suffering servant/ prophet is not on his own, but dependent on An Other.

Philippians 2: 5 - 11

Commentaries will indicate that this may well be an early Christian baptismal hymn inserted by Paul into his letter of encouragement to the Philippians. It pictures Christ practicing things not much practiced, or at least not much commended in our culture today, humility, obedience and acceptance. Questions emerge, did God raise Jesus as a "reward" for suffering? Sometimes it sounds that way. I think, rather, that as another passage from Isaiah says, "God's ways are not our ways," and God works a victory through cross and suffering, through self-emptying rather than self-assertion or force. We sang "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," last Sunday, but this text suggests it is the right hymn for this Sunday also. The important point is that such acclamation is not triumphal, i.e. our God is bigger/ better than your God. It is cruciform, through suffering a victory, through the cross, a resurrection.

Luke 19: 28 - 40

Somewhat similar to last Sunday's gospel lesson, the story of Mary's anointing of Jesus, in that one has a sense in hearing this story of Palm Sunday from Luke, of some greater purpose playing itself out in the midst of a lot of ordinary stuff like donkeys, palm branches, dirt roads and shouting crowds. Something is going on here that is completely of and on earth and yet completely of heaven, to use a metaphor that some find helpful, others not. This is sort of the way Holy Week has often seemed to me, as if we were living at the intersection, the cross(roads), of temporal and eternal, ordinary and extraordinary, earth and heaven. But we don't need to "get away" to some heavenly, spiritual realm. We need rather to see the eternal in the present, the miracle that enfolds on earth. So I am trying to imagine a couple of guys hot wiring a car, the owner shouting out, "WTF?," and the guys saying, "The Lord has need of it."