

Weekly Reading – Monday, March 23, 2009

In this post we are looking at the lessons of the Common Ecumenical Lectionary for Sunday, March 29, 2009, which is the Fifth Sunday of Lent this year. The following Sunday, April 5, is Palm/ Passion Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. So, we are far on now in the Lenten Season and the readings reflect it.

Jeremiah 31: 31 - 34

The context, in the book of the prophet Jeremiah, is restoration and return from Exile in Babylon. God will bring the exiles home, and God will "make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." Note that the emphasis is on God's initiative. God will bring, God will make. But this covenant will, we read in vs. 32, be different. Different than the covenant made after the Exodus at Sinai. How will it be different? Answer: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." I am recalling Paul Tillich's distinction between heteronomy, autonomy and theonomy. In all three *nomos* means law or norms. In heteronomy the law is external, outside oneself and over against us. Jeremiah seems to think of the Sinai Covenant in this way, as external. Autonomy means self-law or self-rule, the way of rebellion against the law/ norms that are over against us. So teenagers rebel and assert their autonomy, "You can't tell me what to do!" Sometimes these appear to us the only choices. External law/ standards or rebellion. Tillich pointed to a third possibility, theonomy, that is the law of God written within us, internalized by us, and made our own. Thus Jeremiah, "No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." Christians will read this as what God does in Christ, writing the law within us, upon our hearts.

Hebrews 5: 5 - 10

And here we are, what God does in Christ. The image throughout Hebrews and in this text is of a priest. Jesus becomes our high priest. It is the nature of the priestly office to look or face in two directions. On one hand, a priest represents human beings before and to God. So Jesus is described here in quite human ways. "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death and he was heard because of his reverent submission." So in this way Jesus fully embodies our own humanity and brings it before God. But the priest also turns and represents God to the people. Thus, in vs. 9, "and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." The emphasis here falls on "high priest" and "forever." Jesus is the one priest we need and he is forever. We don't need to look for others nor do we need to do over his work of grace and reconciliation. It is forever.

John 12: 20 - 33

John 12 brings us to the conclusion of Jesus' public ministry in this gospel and places us at the edge of the long section known as the Farewell Discourse, chapters 13 - 17. So there is a

sense of an ending here, even though many more chapters make up the fourth gospel. The ending or climax is signaled by the arrival of "some Greeks," people from beyond the Jewish world and culture. I hadn't noticed until this year a certain symmetry between this story and the story of the Magi and their visit at the birth of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew. At both ends of Jesus' life, Gentiles arrive, seeking him, thus pointing to the universal nature of the gospel message. In a way typical for the fourth gospel there is a seeming disconnect between the straight-forward and down-to-earth request of the Greek pilgrims, "Sir, we want to see Jesus," and his reply, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." They will see him, the whole world shall, as he is lifted up on the cross. In verses 24 and following Jesus speaks of the meaning of his death using the metaphor of grain which falling to the earth and dying bears much fruit. So his death shall bear great fruit, and life which loses itself finds/fulfills itself. The final verses of the lection give us a kind of mini-Gethsemane: "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say, 'Father save me from this hour?'" Jesus' response to his own question, which is ratified by a voice from the heavens, understands the cross as exaltation and glorification. There are mixed responses to the voice from heaven. Some said it was thunder, some said an angel. Signs remain ambiguous. Some respond in faith, some do not. But Jesus' word is not ambiguous, "When I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." So we conclude with the universal note sounded when the Greeks arrive and ask to see Jesus. They shall see him, only not as they expected.