

Weekly Reading – Monday, April 20, 2009

Okay, we're now looking at the lessons for Easter III, April 26, 2009. The series from Acts continues, as does the epistle series from I John. For the gospel we move, for one week from John, to Luke. Reading from John's gospel will continue, as is customary, during Eastertide. After Pentecost, the lectionary goes back to the Gospel of the Year, Mark.

Acts 3: 12 - 19

The events of Pentecost Day behind them, the apostles Peter and John sally forth into Jerusalem where they encounter a crippled beggar. Now the once cowed disciples are apostles and "prophets-like-Jesus." Vested with new authority and the Spirit's power they direct the crippled man to stand and walk. The threesome then enter the Temple together, which is significant as the crippled man would probably have been prohibited from entering the Temple because of his affliction. Subsequently, an astonished crowd gathers before Peter and John. The crowd seems to think Peter and John may be deities themselves or that the power they have brought to bear is their own. The apostles set them straight, indicating that the man has not been made to walk by their power or piety (interesting!), but by God's power, the God of Abraham who has now raised Jesus from the dead. They mince no words, "You killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead." Their sin is, however, termed vs. 17, "ignorance," which is often how the problem is described in Acts. It's not so much that they are morally reprobate as they are ignorant. The lesson ends with an invitation to repentance, to turn around that "times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord." I love that last phrase. There are several themes here. Perhaps the most prominent is about power and the role of the apostles. It's not about them. Not about their power. It's God's power. Power and efforts to "get it" by others who see the benefits but not the source is a persistent theme in Acts. Sometimes in Acts people (e.g. Simon the magician in Acts 8) want power, but does get that it's based on faith and relationship with God and Jesus. Here Peter and John are clear about the source and who's on first. Another theme is the back and forth in Acts between life in community, the text we had last week, and public witness and engagement. Throughout the early chapters in Jerusalem, we will witness this back and forth. Life in community and witness in the world. The church gathered and the church sent or scattered.

I John 3: 1 - 7

While I mostly try to avoid subjective language about Scripture, I must confess I struggle with I John. Partly it's the level of abstraction in the language and partly it's the dualities or, to put it another way, that things are either black or white, no gray. Okay, got that off my chest. From John's point of view, faith in Christ really moves people out of the world, not literally, but in terms of where they belong and who they are. "The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him." This sense of being strangers in the world because of commitment to Christ is real; it's also a bit dangerous as it can lead to or be put in service of a cult-like mentality. John's theme and point seem to be that faith and being in Christ, abiding in him, will be demonstrated and evidenced by being without sin and by demonstrations of love. "No one who abides in him sins." The problem here is what might be called "the sin

that abides." In reality, believers continue to sin and somehow we have to come to grips with that or else we end up being dishonest with ourselves and others. I'm not sure John's language helps. What John's language does do is remind us and assure us that something decisive has happened in Christ for us, that a new way and life have been opened up. I just wish it weren't quite so black and white.

Luke 24: 36b - 48

After the Emmanus Road story, those two disciples reverse course back to Jerusalem to tell the others. There the risen Jesus appears to the whole group. He says "Peace be with you." And they were "startled and terrified." Jesus does two things to allay their fears. He shows them his wounds, to indicate that it really is him and he's not a ghost. And second he has something to eat to indicate that he is really a person, not an apparition. I commented last week on the significance of the wounds and how it may tie in to our own capacity to embrace our own "wounds" and the marks that life makes upon us. Having had a sort of sacramental moment, eating together, Jesus then opens Scripture up to them, in a pattern very much like the Emmaus story although the order of Scripture and sacrament is reversed from there. He "opens their minds" to understand his resurrection and its meaning, that repentance and forgiveness of sins (see Acts above) are to be proclaimed in his name. A whole new beginning. A whole new beginning with a real person with whom we can have a relationship. In verse 49 Jesus charges the disciples to wait, to sit tight, until they have been "clothed with power from on high," i. e. the Holy Spirit. It's instructive to compare the endings of Matthew and Luke. In Matthew the disciples are charged, "Go into all the world." In Luke they are told to "wait," to sit tight until they have received power from on high. There are things that need doing in this world that require some power, some spirit, other than our own. The church depends upon a power and spirit that come to it, sent by Christ. Often we seem ready to charge off on our own when it might be wise to wait for God's power to "clothe" us.