

Weekly Reading – Monday, May 3, 2010

As I mention this week over at "What's Tony Thinking?" I am heading Down Under this week for work and travel in OZ and NZ. While away I may use archive editions of Weekly Reading.

This one, however, is fresh and new for this coming Sunday, May 9, 2010, the Sixth Sunday of Easter and Mother's Day. For what it's worth: I've thought Mother's Day the kind of thing to acknowledge in welcome/ announcements and in prayers, rather than being the focus of the sermon.

Acts 16: 9 - 15

This seemingly innocuous selection reports something quite remarkable, the beginning of Christian preaching in Europe. Until now Paul had been working the area we know as Turkey. But he has a dream in which a Macedonian appears to him (Macedonia is contemporary Greece more or less) and implores Paul to, "Come to Macedonia and help us." Paul does, finding his way to the town of Philippi where Lydia becomes the first Christian in Europe and the head of the church there. Preachers might find value in contemplating Paul's dream of the Macedonian, a man who calls Paul to go to a land and people that were "off the map" so to speak. Who are our Macedonians? That is, who are the people calling out for ministry, presence and help from us but who may not be of our culture, race, or class? So many of us clergy and churches minister only to those more or less just like us or to the existing membership. Who are our Macedonians? And that doesn't mean we have to cross an ocean necessarily. It may mean crossing town, or crossing barriers of class or culture or generation. It may mean listening to and for "the spiritual but not religious," or to those who have come to God through 12 step groups. Who, in the middle of the night, do you hear calling out to you? And an entire other sermon might be developed around Lydia, the first Christian in Europe, who has a receptive heart and practices hospitality.

Revelation 21: 10, 22 - 22: 5

A wonderful and powerful vision of the New Jerusalem. The Temple is no more. The sun and moon too are gone. The glory of God and the lamp of the Lamb continually light the city and God dwells there so a Temple is not needed. Clergy, presumably, are also redundant! But this is not an armed fortress city. It is a city that includes the nations of the world, who walk according to the light of the Lord. As chapter 22 begins we hear of the river that flows through the holy city and the tree of life, the leaves of which are for the healing of the nations. Lord, we need that tree and its balm today! Did Norman McLean title his famous book, *A River Runs Through It*, from this text? These visions from Revelation are the breaking in of God's new age, new creation, which we glimpse here and there, now and then, in this fallen world so that we might be strengthened to live in and towards the future that is God's and ours which is present but not yet.

John 14: 23 - 29 or John 5: 1 - 9

Preachers have two texts to choose from. John 5 is a great story, so perhaps easier to preach, but the other reading keeps us in the Farewell Discourse, which makes sense in this Eastertide season. I'll comment mostly on that text, saying only this about John 5. So often we speak of God's work as things that everyone welcomes. Oddly, that's not so true in Scripture. Here, as often in the NT and John, healing is disruptive, controversial, and protested by those who are in charge. Sometimes God's presence is a healing balm, but often a disruptive outbreak of the resurrection.

Turning to John 14, the first verses link love and obedience, which is not a linkage that is particularly obvious or natural in our day and culture, where love is little more than a feeling. Here love means commitment, love means not a warm fuzzy but doing what Jesus commanded. The second part, verses 25 - 29, offers very important, if brief, teaching about the nature and work of the Holy Spirit which John speaks of as "The Advocate." The background to that term is that Jesus anticipates his followers will find themselves "on trial," if not literally then metaphorically, in the days to come. Do we find ourselves on trial for being followers of Christ? Here Jesus promises the Holy Spirit will be their Teacher, their Counselor and their defense attorney. The Holy Spirit will teach, giving God's word and sustaining wisdom for new and challenging situations, but will also remind the church of all that Jesus has taught. In other words, what the Spirit teaches will be consistent with the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus and not a departure from them. John seems to worry some about charismatics who somehow forget about discipleship. Then, once again, Jesus promises peace, but again it is not the peace of this world. It is the peace that comes from being part of the struggle, not a part from it. See my comments week before last about the nature of the world's peace and the nature of Christ's peace.