

Weekly Reading – Monday, June 15, 2009

On deck are the lessons for Sunday, June 21, 2009, which is the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time and Proper 7. It is also Father's Day! And it is the summer solstice. As noted last week, we are in that stretch of the year when there are two options provided for the Old Testament lesson. I don't know that I will always comment on both, as I did last week, but we'll try that again now.

I Samuel 17: 32 - 49

The epic story of David and Goliath. These days, such a text may suffer one of two fates, neither of which are good. It may be relegated to a children's story and dismissed, or dismissed even sooner for its association of religion and violence. The core theme is David's impossible confidence in God, a confidence that does not shrink or wilt in the face of giant threats and obstacles. While King Saul and his armies (including David's older brothers) were paralyzed by Goliath and his taunts, David's point of reference was not Goliath and his awesome size and armour, but the awesome God and his promises. Two particular aspects of the story are suggestive. Saul insists that David gird himself in his (Saul's) armour, but David finds the stuff clunky and confining. I did a conference last year on church buildings and used this as my theme text. Many of the church buildings we have inherited from the Christendom era are now, in a new time, like Saul's armour: impressive, even beautiful, but burdensome. They don't help us in our mission. They confine and disable us. Too many churches spend inordinate amounts of their energy and resources maintaining the building. Imagine David spending all his time polishing the armour and never taking on Goliath! The other detail of particular note, and the mirror image of Saul's armour, is David's choice of weapon and mode of combat: five smooth stones and a slingshot. Saul and his own brother's, were all completely invested in conventional ways of seeing and dealing with their Goliath problem. David saw the whole thing from a completely different perspective and envisioned methods that we're surprising and "foolish" (I Corinthians 1: 18). Once again, God's ways are not our ways, God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Don't dismiss this story, engage it and let it engage you.

Job 38: 1 - 11

The other Old Testament option is chosen to be a direct complement to the gospel lesson from Mark 4, wherein Jesus stills the storm. These are the opening verses of God's "answer to Job," spoken out of the whirlwind. The emphasis would fall on verses 8 - 11. "Or who shut the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?" "(Who) prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped?'" Often in Scripture the sea represents chaos and disorder. God rules over the chaos and orders the world making it liveable and secure (Genesis 1 - 3). Here the theme is one of the vast difference between God and (hu)man. Man is finite and contingent, mortal. God is infinite. Think how awesome the summer thunderstorm can be, how it brings us to, in the Psalmist's words, "Be still and know that I am God." So God speaks out of the storm never really answering Job's questions but nonetheless "answering" them.

II Corinthians 6: 1 - 13

It may be helpful to go back to an earlier point in this letter, say 2: 14 - 3: 3, to get a better sense of the issue Paul is addressing and of the language of "commending" used in 6:4. Paul is contrasting his ministry to that of various "super apostles" or itinerant teachers who pointed to their great deeds and accomplishments as a way of commending the gospel. What they end up touting, however, is themselves. The old Adam, the relentless ego, reappears under a new banner. Sort of like the banner that proclaims "Under New Management," but you discover nothing is really new at all (sometimes even the banner is old). Paul is saying that everything has really been made new. So in 6: 2 he speaks of the acceptable time and the day of salvation effected by what God has done in Christ. Look back to last week's verses, 5: 17, "Everything old has passed away; everything has become new!" And yet, among the Corinthians, Paul's competitors are playing the same old games and the Corinthians are taking the bait. Note the list Paul begins in verse 4, the ways in which he "commends" himself: hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonment, riots, sleepless nights and hunger. This is not the gospel of health and wealth! Paul preaches the cross and Christ crucified. The gospel is not just another way to win friends and influence people or to gain all the things of this world. It means dying to this world and being raised to new life in Christ. Today we have various super-apostles whether allegedly Christian or New Age who say, "be like me! Learn my laws of success." "Be like me and win the world." Not everything, Paul tells us, is what it seems to be.

Mark 4: 35 - 41

The introduction sets the stage; this is a story of Jesus and his disciples. The crowds have been left behind. It is for them, or to put it slightly differently, for the church. It is for us: those gathered in Christ's name but who wonder at times if he cares or if he has gone to sleep. There are "other boats," but that suggestive detail is not developed. A huge storm breaks upon the disciples with waves crashing around and into their boat. If you've ever actually been in such a storm, it's pretty scary stuff. Don't judge the disciples too easily. I, for one, would be in panic mode for sure. (Note the parallel to Saul and David's soldier brothers whose panic has paralyzed them). Jesus, improbably, is asleep. The disciples rouse him asking, "Don't you care?" He rebukes the wind and sea, but he also rebukes them. "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" The disciples do not ever come off very well in Mark, this being one of many times they don't get it and one of several instances in which Jesus "rebukes" them. Well, these days, we don't have to look far to see the storm clouds or feel the rising water: the economy, shrinking savings, declining churches, and manifold challenges/ storms both globally and personally. The text asserts the power of Jesus to still the storm, to rule over chaos, to bring a new day. One often hears this gospel, Mark, the earliest gospel, described as one in which the humanity of Jesus is most evident, as opposed to say John where the divinity of Christ seems clear. And yet, this is a "theophany" a revealing of God. Christ is not a mere mortal enjoining us to keep calm and have faith. He is one who disarms the very real powers of chaos and death and rules over them. It's interesting that the text concludes with a question, the disciples question, "Who then is this?" In some ways that is the question that is posed again and again in Mark and is not really clearly answered until

and after the cross and crucifixion. Despite Mark's "low Christology" this story asserts that Jesus is the revelation of God and the power of God unto salvation.