

Weekly Reading – Monday, August 10, 2009

We are looking now at the lectionary texts for Sunday, August 16, 2009, which is Proper 15 and the twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time. I'll offer comments on both of the Old Testament lessons, the semi-continuous first, then the typological option.

I Kings 2: 10 - 12; 3: 3 - 14

The long and colorful story of David comes to conclusion as David now "sleeps with his ancestors," and is buried in the city of David. Solomon ascends to the throne, that brief report cloaking a good deal of palace intrigue. The second and longer portion of the lesson recounts Solomon's humble request for wisdom, which "pleased the Lord." "Give your servant," prayed Solomon, "an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern your great people?" The passage sounds as if it has been written by a PR staffer for the Solomonic court. But, if so, he did one of great PR jobs of history as Solomon's identification with wisdom has certainly endured. The actual history, including the judgment of Scripture, is different. Solomon may have sought wisdom, but often governed in more oppressive than wise ways. Still, the focus here is the humility of Solomon's request and that he sought wisdom to govern when invited by God to "ask what I should give you," rather than asking for things of a more self-centered nature. In that sense it parallels, "Seek ye first the Kingdom and all these other things shall be given to you as well." The use of the word "discern" in verse 9 is interesting, especially in light of the current popularity of "discernment" as a spiritual practice. Is discernment today of the Solomonic type, wisdom for life and ability to separate the good from evil, or is it at least sometimes more self-interested and devoted to one's own spiritual path or welfare alone?

Proverbs 9: 1 - 6

Lady Wisdom sets her table and invites people to come and eat or gain wisdom. "You that are simple, turn in here! Come eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed." As a companion to the John text in which Jesus speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, it prepares the reader for the idea of being invited to the feast which God prepares and offers. "Lay aside immaturity and live, and walk in the way of insight." In a thousand ways it seems as if the culture in which we live today invites and encourages immaturity more than maturity. Preachers might ask what it means to be mature, a grown up. The verse which immediately follow the lection might help formulate a response and they are provocative. They indicate that one characteristic of a wise person is that she or he learns from correction. "The wise, when rebuked, will love you. Give instruction to the wise, and they will become wiser still." By contrast the foolish are those who don't listen or learn. "A scoffer who is rebuked will only hate you." "Rebuke" is a strong word, but one finds Jesus willing to rebuke even those closest to him, as when he rebukes Peter in Mark 8:32.

Ephesians 5: 15 - 20

The wisdom theme continues with the opening words of the Ephesians lection, "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise." Again, we are in the more exhortative

section of Paul's letter. It is important to remember that this is about how those who have known the grace of the Lord Jesus live rather than how to live in order, by our works, to gain God's grace. There are a series of contrasts here: live as wise people, not unwise; do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is; do not get drunk with wine/ debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit. I imagine that part of being wise is the capacity to see how very foolish you have been at times and to acknowledge that. Again, (see comments on Proverbs we seem to live in a culture today that often encourages foolish behavior under the guise of dictimes like, "Be yourself, have fun, enjoy life" or "Be real, be spontaneous, and 'Go for it.'") One might reflect on the conditions and choices that led to the current economic crisis, which implicates both high (market theoreticians, economists, politicians and government officials) and low (borrowers who took loans/ mortgages they couldn't really expect to carry). In other words, or to put it another way, what may look like wisdom (think Alan Greenspan) may turn out to be ideological foolishness.

John 6: 51 - 58

Reading this passage one can imagine critics of Christianity, whether in the first century or the twenty-first, having a real field day. "Listen to what their Messiah tells them, it's right here in their own Scriptures, you must 'eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood.' These people practice cannibalism!" In working with this challenging material in John 6, which seems to get only deeper and more challenging with each passing week, I have been helped to recall the thought-world and framework of the Letter to the Hebrews. In Hebrews the author contrasts the cult and the constant machinations of the priests to win God's approval with the act of Christ once and for all which does away with constant efforts to get on God's good side. When Jesus speaks of himself as the bread of life and says "whoever comes to me will never be hungry," it seems that, similar to Hebrews, he is saying that he does away with that type of religion and human experience that requires constant, anxiety-ridden and repeated attempts to win God over or to get on God's good side. That's over, grace has come, participate in my life and live! Now, in this week's lesson, that bread of life becomes his flesh and blood, which causes both the Jews and his disciples to draw back. What are we to make of this? Well, at least this, that Christianity is not about getting away to some spiritual other world or new or "higher" consciousness. Our faith is pretty earthy, fleshly, material and thus bound up with real life and history. No gnosticism here! A second possibility is the implied contrast between believing as mainly a mental/ intellectual activity and eating as the form of participation in Christ. This should be a comfort on the Alzheimer's unit! Jesus doesn't say, "When you understand all this, come and eat." He just says, "Eat, drink, do this." Finally, perhaps most importantly, this would seem to be an invitation to participate in his death and in the cross as a way of life. In that sense it may parallel sections of the synoptics on the cost of discipleship and suffering as part of following Christ.