

Weekly Reading – Monday, August 11, 2008

We're looking here at the lessons for the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time or Sunday, August 17, 2008. There is a choice when it comes to the Old Testament lesson, and as regular readers know, I generally go with the typological choice rather than the semi-continuous one, which has been from Genesis this summer. I do this because most congregations need focus and the typological choice, by definition, relates to the gospel reading rather than adding a new and different focus. The downside of course is that this makes the Old Testament lesson secondary, serving to prepare the way for the Gospel and not being treated in its own right.

Isaiah 56: 1, 6 – 8

In second (40 - 55) and third (56 - 66) Isaiah there is definite move toward universalizing upon which Christianity, as it grew from Jewish roots, would build. So instead of foreigners and eunuchs feeling hopeless and never "part of," (vs. 3 - 4), all these too shall be gathered to God's holy mountain (God's presence). "For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people," in verse 7 is a well-known and powerful verse. Note that in verse 8, not only outsiders or the ritually impure are gathered but "outcasts of Israel." How does the Church, and specific congregations, not just affirm God's universal concern and reach, but serve as an authentic instrument of the it? Crucial, in my view, is to keep the focus on God and keep it away from ourselves and our good, inclusive selves. Another way to put this is prominent in Romans, from which our epistle readings have come: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Inclusivity is not our virtue or our human program, it is God's initiative to a sinners, which is the really inclusive category!!

Romans 11: 1 - 2a, 29 – 32

Speaking of Romans . . . this chapter continues Paul's focus on God's promise to Israel and how Jesus followers are to think of those Jews who have rejected Jesus. Does that abrogate God's promise and covenant? No way, says Paul. Verse 29: "The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable." Sounds like good news to me! The lectionary pericope gives us the initial question, "Has God rejected his people?," then skips Paul's long argument to cut to the chase at vs. 29. This makes life easier, in a way, but preachers should be sure to work through the omitted verses. One of the threads of teaching at work here is God's capacity to use human sin for God's purposes. Thus, the rejection of Jesus by official Judaism opened a way for the mission to the Gentiles. God made lemonade from a lemon! But this should never tempt Christians to superiority or super-secessionism. Or as my grandmother memorably said to me, as a rather arrogant young man, "Mister, don't you ever think you are any better than anyone else!"

Matthew 15: (10 - 20) 21 – 28

The other two lessons have well-prepared us for themes of God's surprising (even to Jesus!) outreach to those beyond Israel. The first, optional, portion of the lesson takes a shot at those good (bad) boys of the Bible, the Pharisees, who imagined that they were the good people, who would be saved by their own efforts. Lest we think that's someone else's problem,

consider how often we in the church also imagine that we are the good people because of our good behavior and support for good causes and values. No, none but God is righteous. Salvation is not by our good efforts but by God's good grace. Blessed are those who know their need for God, which is where the desperate Canaanite woman comes in, as a kind of anti-type to the self-righteous Pharisees. She made no claim of merit or deserving God's attention. Her only claim was raw, desperate need. "Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." There's something about one of your children being sick or in danger that makes shy people strong! But now the drama takes a new turn. Jesus had made clear that his focus is reclaiming his own people, that he had made decisions about his priorities. Get God's people on track and go from there. So Jesus balks. But the woman is not to be deterred. So, as is often the case in biblical stories, faith is neither quiet nor passive, but bold, assertive and insistent. What a marvelous story! Enjoy it.