

Weekly Reading – Monday, August 18, 2008

Seattle readers may wish to note that I will be preaching on these lessons at Bethany UCC (Seattle's Beacon Hill neighborhood) this Sunday, August 24. After that, I preach next at the opening services at Emmanuel College in Toronto on September 10.

We're looking here at the texts for August 24, 2008, which is Proper 16 as well as the Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Isaiah 51: 1 – 6

The promise of comfort for Zion, of deliverance for God's people. I've just read Cormac McCarthy's "The Road," (see "What's Tony Thinking?") which juxtaposes/ intersects with this text in interesting ways. "The Road" is a post-apocalyptic novel set on a grey, devastated earth. There is, nonetheless, a glimmer of God's persistence, despite all. So these lines in this text struck me: "For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places." And, "For the heavens will vanish like smoke, and earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever, and deliverance will never be ended." Sounds themes similar to the more famous, thanks to Handel, Isaiah 40, "All flesh is grass, but the Word of God endures forever." As a companion for the Matthew lesson, the emphasis here is that God will deliver God's people, that Jesus comes to do so and that God's word (Christ) endures forever.

Romans 12: 1 – 8

The "therefore" section of Romans begins, with its greater focus on ethics and life in Christian community after the strongly theological focus of chapters 1 - 11. A word that seems newly prominent, "transformation," figures here. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Transformation here is not something we do, as in "Let us now transform ourselves." It is something God in Christ is doing in us. I speak and write about "Transforming Congregational Culture." Some turn this into a program, a set of things we will do (or not). The real transformation, for my money, is getting over the idea that its all up to us, all about us, and getting focused on what God has done, is doing, and has promised. The transformation is taking ourselves a little less seriously and taking God a good bit more seriously. That fits well with where Paul moves in subsequent verses of this reading, "I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think . . ." Life in Christian community becomes possible when we get that "It's not about you." Oh sure, you're important, but no more than anyone else. And what really matters is larger than any one person or their ego. It is Christ and the Body of Christ, the church. Our gifts are to be used to "build up the Body."

Matthew 16: 13 - 20

A kind of hinge-point in Matthew's Gospel, after which Jerusalem and the cross are more clearly on the horizon. Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" This relatively easy conversation about a third party, "the people," suddenly turns, coming

close. "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Jesus affirms Peter and indicates he will be the rock upon which the church shall be built. But note Jesus' stress on revelation. "You didn't figure this out, Peter. It was revealed to you." Hence Peter can claim no credit for insight or brilliance. It's God's doing. The text ends with Jesus "sternly ordering the disciples to tell no one" about him. Some wag suggested this may be the one command of Jesus which the church has kept! But the key question, "Who do you say that I am?" is so current and important. The church, particularly the liberal or mainline Protestant church and my own denomination, the United Church of Christ, has I think drifted on this matter. Jesus is an interesting figure, a good teacher, but not much more. One can understand individuals being all over the place on this as faith is explored and as faith grows. As individuals we may not be able to affirm the full-orbed confession of Peter because we neither know enough nor have we lived enough (or simply reject it). But the church cannot be flaky or fuzzy on these matters without losing its center and core. So it's interesting, and important, that the focus is not Peter the man, but the church.