

## **Weekly Reading – Monday, August 21, 2006**

Here are my comments on the lections for Sunday, August 27, 2006, which is the Twenty-First Sunday of Ordinary Time and Proper Sixteen. This Sunday also marks the conclusion of significant series for all three of the texts. The Old Testament series on Samuel/David/Solomon concludes, as does the semi-continuous reading of Ephesians, and the five weeks in the Gospel of John, Chapter 6. Next Sunday, the gospel readings move back to the Gospel of the Year, Mark.

### **I Kings 8: (1-6, 10-11) 22 - 30, 41 - 43**

Solomon dedicates the Temple of the Lord bringing to a conclusion a series of readings that began with Samuel's anointing of the youth, David. Much has been accomplished, but the seeds of ruin have been planted even by the achievements. Solomon's prayer is suitably humble, acknowledging that no earthly dwelling can contain the Lord. Moreover, and perhaps even importantly, that this God is not simply a God for the Hebrew people but for all people (verses 41 - 43). So several important tensions are held in Solomon's great prayer: God is identified with a place and engaged in life and history, but not limited to one place; God is identified with a people, but not limited to that people alone. He is not a tribal deity. Throughout the lection and the optional verses there is a powerful sense of the holiness of God. Do our temples, churches and sacred spaces have this "otherness" about them? Are we, when in them, in the presence of the One who we may call upon, but cannot control?

### **Ephesians 6: 10 - 20**

Driving through a rural town recently I saw a sign pointing to the local Methodist Church, adorned with the current United Methodist slogan, "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors." (Sounds like the Church of the Holy Enema to me!) There is little recognition in this understandable invitation of the power of sin, of the principalities and powers at work in the world, and of the battle that we are called to wage. Ephesians, and this passage, presuppose that faith entails elements of struggle, even battle. No, this is not a call or permission for holy war, "for our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the authorities, the rulers, the cosmic powers of this present darkness." Moreover, the whole armor of God is the armor of peacemaking, of standing firm in the midst of challenge, of doing the hard work of reconciliation. What I like about this text, and what we miss with superficial objections to military images, is its understanding that a battle is going on. It's going on in each of our hearts, first and foremost. (Recall Solzenitsyn: the line between good and evil does not pass between nations or religions, but right through every human heart). It's also going on in congregations, and in communities. Something is at stake. Too often, in our nice, friendly open churches it seems as if little is at stake, that there is no battle going on.

## **John 6: 56 - 69**

This is the final reading in the five-week series from the majestic sixth chapter of John. Just as objections to military language miss the point of Ephesians, so here objections to the seeming cannibalistic language of Jesus miss the point. He's not talking about cannibalism, he is talking about his death, and that his followers will find, as Bonhoeffer put it, "When Christ calls a man, he calls him to come and die." Whether that means a literal martyrdom, or more likely, a dying to self-centered self and a rising to God in Christ, each is a death. It is this costliness of discipleship that causes some to go away. This text is actually a good segue back to the Gospel of Mark, for Mark steadily emphasizes the cost of discipleship in upcoming texts. Two further thoughts. One might sum up this whole chapter on the bread of life by asking, "What do you feed on?" or "What feeds you?" It seems to me we each have characteristic qualities and emotions that we feed upon whether they be anxiety or anger, social status or busyness, service or beauty. What do you, and I, feed on; and does it nourish us? A final comment, note the way verse 65, continues to construe faith as a gift of God, cf. verse 39. As there is a parting of ways among disciples, the tendency of the remaining faithful might be to credit their own brilliance, faithfulness, or virtue. That is a recurrent temptation whenever there is conflict and a parting of the ways. No, says vs. 65, like other verses earlier in this chapter, faith remains a gift, a mystery, not an achievement. In this, the John reading, connects back to I Kings and the God who cannot be controlled or confined by our temples.