

Weekly Reading – Monday, August 25, 2008

These comments are on the lessons for Sunday, August 31, 2008, which is the Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time and Proper 17.

Jeremiah 15: 15 – 21

The prophet's vocation is a tough one, and lonely too. But it's probably a good sign, and a reminder to would be prophets, that Jeremiah does not clothe himself in self-righteousness or arrogance. Rather, he struggles with a vocation that puts him at odds with his own people. At times, he even accuses God of having seduced him. Vs. 10, though outside the actual lection, is telling. "Woe is me, my mother, that you ever bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land!" In vs. 15 Jeremiah calls upon the Lord for comfort and presence in his lonely spot. "O Lord . . . remember me and visit me, and bring down retribution on my persecutors." Vs. 16 is a particularly powerful image of the prophet who has "eaten" God's word, taken it into himself. "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart." At one point the word of God is delight and joy, while at another it is the source of Jeremiah's isolation and suffering. In 18 Jeremiah accuses the Lord, but in 19 God responds, offering to take Jeremiah back "if he utters what is precious and not what is worthless." Working for this God is no picnic . . . but it is all that matters.

Romans 12: 9 – 21

The heading beneath which this list of exhortations should be read comes from last week's reading, "Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Here is the life of those whose mind-set has been/ is being transformed by God. The first three verses, 9 - 12, are about as close as Paul comes to something that could go on a Hallmark card or a calligraphed wall-hanging. 14 - 21 have a sort of unity in how Christians are to deal with evil and enemies, which of course links back to Jeremiah and forward to Matthew and the words of Jesus there. There is also a way in which the Beatitudes echo through here, especially in the closing words, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Being "overcome by evil," does not mean being on the losing side. It means getting down on evil's level, playing by its rules or conforming to the pattern of this world. Love does not always, in my experience, change another or convert those who practice evil. So caution needs to be exercised lest what we think of as love "enable" either the abusive behaviors or irresponsibility of another. But the point, I take it, is to continue to live as those whose mind-set has been transformed even when that is very hard to do. Note that this is written to a community of people. In dealing with evil or abuse, we need others!

Matthew 16: 21 – 28

More than some weeks, all three of the lessons have much in common, as they envision the cost of discipleship, the way that belonging to God means not belonging to the world. Today's gospel text follows directly on last week's seeming high moment of Peter's

confession. When Jesus says that doing God's will means that he will suffer and die, Peter will hear none of it. He apparently thought that being "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," (vs. 16) meant fame, honor, glory and worldly acclaim. When Peter gets in Jesus' face to oppose him on this count, Jesus is severe. "Get behind me, Satan." The path of worldly honor, success, acclaim is not of God, but of evil. "You are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things." Peter becomes the first, or at least one of the first, Christians to be embarrassed by Jesus! What about us? Are we embarrassed by one who is not a "success" in the world's ways or eyes? So many of our various interpretations of Jesus seem an attempt to make him fit into our world and our ways, to not embarrass us. Perhaps we should fit ourselves to his ways and risk the embarrassment.