

Weekly Reading – Monday, August 31, 2009

These are the lessons for Sunday, September 6, 2009, which is Labor Day Weekend. Jesus is busy, laboring.

Proverbs 22: 1- 2, 8 -9, 22 - 23

The selected verses place an emphasis on the poor, as well as God's regard and our regard for the poor. This makes this Old Testament choice go well with the epistle lesson from James. The basic framework here is that justice and virtue will be vindicated and honored in the way that God has ordered the world, while injustice and arrogance will be judged and punished. We can affirm this sense of ultimate justice and moral meaning while also acknowledging that in the short term and in the midst of history's ambiguities, it sometimes appears not to be the case at all. Sometimes in the short term and a fallen world, justice is flaunted and the unjust prosper. Verses 22 - 23 indicate the vulnerability of the poor in society at large, "because they are poor," and in the courts of justice, i.e. "at the gate." Verse 23 is pretty unequivocal that God takes the side, and cause, of the poor and vulnerable and would therefore expect the church to do so as well.

Isaiah 35: 4 - 7a

This is the typological Old Testament selection, chosen to support the gospel reading from Mark 7. Signs of the coming of God, of the new age, of the Messiah will be: eyes of the blind opened, ears of the deaf unstopped, lame leaping, and mute singing. Is this intended to be taken literally or symbolically, i.e. "spiritually?" How about both? In either instance the presence of God or God's anointed one effects transformation of life. This way of speaking, transformation, points to God's presence as revelation, power which intrudes upon the given reality in ways that transform and alter it. One thinks of many hymns and other music, not least "Amazing Grace," and "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing."

James 2: 1 - 10, 14 - 17

The second reading in a five weeks series from this epistle, with its central theme, 'Faith without works is dead.' James talks turkey about life in community, a community where people fall all over themselves to accommodate the wealthy but disregard the poor or marginal. What does James have to say about this? "Don't do that!" Here's a possible sermon illustration to go with this text. Dorothy Day, legendary founder of the Catholic Worker movement and of kitchens feeding the homeless, was deep in conversation with a homeless man when a reporter arrived to interview her. The reporter grew increasingly and visibly impatient as Day continued her conversation with the homeless man. When she was done, she turned to the reporter and said, "With which one of us did you wish to speak?" The issue/virtue at stake here is partiality and impartiality. The answer is not partiality in reverse, to the poor, but not making such distinctions in the Christian community. The second set of verses, returns to the core theme of faith and works.

Mark 7: 24 - 37

Last week's text, the debate over hand-washing gives way to two stories of healing, at least one and possibly both, among the Gentiles (which is a kind of further comment on the ritual purity issue). When you set last week's text in context, you see Jesus (in the preceding stories) feeding, teaching and healing great crowds. Now in those that follow the purity debate, Jesus is healing Gentiles. The effect is to suggest that established religion is concerned with rules and in-groups/ out-groups, while God's Messiah and Kingdom are in the business of transformation, healing and crossing barriers and boundaries. What's interesting is that Jesus seems to need the assistance and persistence of a desperate and gutsy Gentile woman to extend his mission and ministry beyond his own people. The tension between do-nothing established religion and the incursions of God's realm and reign in Christ calls to mind a story about evangelist Dwight L. Moody. Moody was on a preaching tour in England, drawing great crowds, preaching repentance and salvation. Local clerics were upset and formed a delegation to visit Moody. They said, "What we don't care for Mr. Moody is your way of doing things." To which Moody replied, "I don't care much for it either; but I prefer it to your way of not doing things." Is the church in the gospel business of transformation of life, or not?