

Weekly Reading – Monday, September 21, 2009

We turn now to the lessons for the first official Sunday of autumn, September 27, 2009. This is the Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time and Proper 21. I'll comment on both the Old Testament choices, the semi-continuous from Esther, and the typological from Numbers.

Esther 7: 1 - 6, 9 -10, 9: 20 - 22

The story of Queen Esther is a drama-filled mini-epic that has it all: good and evil, sex and violence, intrigue and courage. By an unexpected turn of events, Esther finds herself Queen in the court of the Persian King, Ahasuerus. The key to the plot is that Esther is Jewish, but this is unknown to her husband and his court. When the conspirator, Haman, contrives to secure his own power base by launching a pogrom against the Jews, Esther faces a hard choice. She can keep silence and perhaps save her own life. Or she can come out of the closet, so to speak, as a Jew and put herself at mortal risk to defend her people. By analogy similar choices face many in our world. Will the privileged speak up and out for those who enjoy no privilege or protection? Will those who have "made it," remember their own people and where they have come from? Will any of us put ourselves at risk to save others (therein lies the connection to Christ)? Though the Book of Esther seldom mentions God (perhaps not at all) God's unseen providence and purpose stands above the drama.

Numbers 11: 4 - 6; 10 - 16, 24 - 29

The overall narrative setting is the wilderness journey of the Hebrew people and the recurrent theme of the people's complaint and murmuring. Moses turns to God saying that his load (carrying and leading this grumpy group) is too much. God instructs Moses to commission a larger leadership group of seventy elders. It is only at this point, and in the final verses of the lection, that we come to the connection with the gospel text for this week. Two men who didn't make it to the commissioning service, Eldad and Medad, nevertheless "get the Spirit." Joshua reports this breach of ecclesiastical procedure to Moses. Moses, far from being torqued out, answers, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" This is of course precisely what Peter claims is happening on the day of Pentecost, that the Lord's Spirit is poured out on all flesh. Note the effect of the spirit, which is transformation of by-standers, on-lookers and spectators into leaders, agents and actors in the fulfillment of God's plan and purpose. One of the challenges in the church today and perhaps throughout much of the church's history is that many church members remain by-standers and spectators instead of coming into their own Spirit-led gifts, calling and ministries. (Many clergy are co-conspirators in this co-dependent state.) I comment on this phenomenon in this week's post at "What's Tony Thinking?" See my comments there on "outward orientation."

James 5: 13 - 20

Curious isn't it that the lectionary choices from James no longer include James's very tough words in 5: 1 - 6 directed at the rich! Today's lection, the fifth in a series of readings from James, include the concluding verses of the epistle. These offer a catalogue of pastoral advice

and admonitions most of which direct people, whatever their condition (sickness, suffering, or joy) to God in prayer. But the interesting thing is how often James insists on the role of human intercession and mediation in these prayers. Whether it is calling upon the elders to pray and anoint the sick (14) or mutual confession in the community of faith (16), there is a very strong emphasis on faith and prayer in community here. The prayer to which James calls us is not just individual or alone, but prayer in relationship and in community. Thus the concluding words, 19 - 20, are about finding the lost brother or sister who has "wandered from the truth." A classic way to put this is to point to the two bars of the cross, one vertical, one horizontal. One reminds us of our relationship with God, the other of our relationship with one another. For James there can be no separation of the two dimensions.

Mark 9: 38 - 50

The crucial middle section of Mark continues. Here the emphasis is on discipleship and Jesus teaching the disciples. Following on the disciples argument among themselves about which of them is the greatest, one of their number, John, complains to Jesus that someone not of their group (cf. Joshua, Eldad and Medad) is casting out demons in Jesus' name. Like Moses in Numbers, Jesus seems unconcerned about unauthorized healing. Then the teaching of Jesus shifts from monitoring the ecclesiastical status of others to paying attention to their own sin and shortcomings as Jesus warns them not to become "stumbling blocks" for "little ones." It's not entirely clear who is meant by "little ones," whether children or new believers. Given the context, I imagine that it means those who are lower down on the pecking order than we imagine ourselves to be. Jesus doesn't want his followers to become officious or controlling, and if they are tempted in that direction drastic measures are necessary. "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off." This passage always leads me to wonder why there aren't more amputees among the biblical literalists? The final verse sums it up, "Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another," which I take to mean, instead of projecting your own issues onto others and policing them, take heed to yourselves and the state of your own soul.