

## Weekly Reading – Monday, August 22, 2008

We turn now to the lessons for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, or September 28, 1008.

Ezekiel 18: 1 - 4, 25 – 32

In the first four verses of this reading the prophet Ezekiel challenges the prevailing and received, arguably Biblical, reasoning that the sins of the fathers are playing themselves out in the lives of subsequent generations. While there is certainly truth in the idea that the past shapes the present, Ezekiel seems to view this as a cover-up or excuse for inaction and responsibility. He dispatches this proverbial wisdom to the refuse bin saying, "Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins who shall die." This allows Ezekiel in the second part of the reading to call upon his contemporaries to turn away from evil and to choose good that they may live. Their future is not pre-determined by the past or the actions of others; it is determined by their present choices. In verse 29 Ezekiel goes deeper to see that beneath the proverbial wisdom sour grapes, its the people of his time that are indulging in blaming. And who is that they blame for their fate? God. "The way of the Lord is unfair." Not so says Ezekiel. The way of the Lord is righteous and good. It is you who are distorted. Stop complaining about God's ways and change your own ways! "Turn, then, and live."

Philippians 2: 1 – 13

This lesson includes the famous Christ hymn. Christ, though in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself . . ." Paul puts this self-emptying Christ at the center of the church and calls upon the Philippians to "Let this same mind be among you that was in Christ Jesus." "Do nothing from selfish ambition and conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." It would seem that Paul's concern is that the congregation and its members may be tempted to the old jockeying of egos and personal agendas. I recall a line from Graham Standish's book "Becoming a Blessed Church," in which Graham says (not sure I remember it correctly) that "dying churches are ego-driven; living churches are Christ-centered." That of course could come across as nothing more than a pious sentiment. Still, it happens to be true. When members of a congregation allow their personal agendas and ego-driven needs to reign, the church--any church--will be in trouble. When the members of the congregation wrench their anxious gazes from themselves to what God has done in Christ, "taking the form of slave . . . so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend . . . every tongue confess that Christ is Lord." Put Christ first (and not in words alone, but in deeds and behaviors) and the church shall be a living and lively one.

Matthew 21: 23 – 32

The gospel lesson gives us two distinct, yet related, parables. In the first Jesus is questioned by the leading priests and elders. In the second parable these same characters would be analogous to the first son who, having said he will go into the vineyard and work, does not

go. In that first parable Jesus responds to their attempt at entrapment with a trap of his own, which reveals where the loyalties of his interrogators truly lie: not with God but with their own vested interests. Jesus has found his message and ministry is not welcomed by those who one would have imagined would welcome it, namely the religious and pious, the priests, elders and Pharisees. His ministry is, however, welcomed by those who one would expect not to have heeded it, namely the compromised, the sinful, the tax collectors and prostitutes. The latter know what the former do not. They know their need of God, their need of God's mercy and grace. The former, while mouthing the words of religion, believe that their own righteousness has made them secure. "There is," reformed theologian John Leith, "no gospel for the righteous. The gospel is only for sinners." And as Paul reminds us that is the truly inclusive category for "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."