

Weekly Reading – Monday, October 5, 2009

In view here this week are the Common Lectionary texts for Sunday, October 11, 2009. This is Proper 23 and the Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Job 23: 1 -9, 16 - 17

In the days when I invited people to give a talk about their "Faith Journey," I asked them to tell us about their experiences of God's presence and of God's absence. Here Job does the latter. Verses 8 - 9, "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him." So does Job testify to the particular darkness that descends at times in many lives, and which has descended in mine at times. Nevertheless, Job holds fast to a couple of things: his claim of innocence and sense of injustice. Job will not cave into the pressures of his friends to say that he must have done something to deserve this. The paradox of Job's argument with his friends is that in their seeming faith they actually deny two things: Job's experience and God. Being able to make it all about us, God while defended, recedes. And, though God, seems absent to and for Job, Job continues to believe that he has to do with God and that if he can lay his case before God, meaning will be restored. Magnificent tensions!

Amos 5: 6 - 7, 10 - 15

The typological Old Testament lesson is from the great prophet of justice, Amos. "Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them." Last week, as the typhoons hit the Philippines I went to an event at the Filipino Cultural Center here in Seattle about the storms and to raise money for relief work. The reports were not only about the storms but about the corrupt government of President Arroyo which builds mansions for officials but has no plan or presence to aid the victims of flooding and devastation. One woman told of the attempt of her sister and family to be plucked from their roof as floodwaters rose. A boat came by but they could only get in if they paid. No pay, no play and no survival. "You who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the need in the gate," are the targets of Amos' judgments. These descriptions and indictments from the 8th century B.C.E. seem all-too-contemporary.

Hebrews 4: 12 - 16

This second reading from Hebrews seems to have two rather distinct parts. In the first, 12 - 13, is the classic description of the word of God as "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword . . ." Over on the "What's Tony Thinking" page this week I report on the recent FACT study on congregational vitality. While some of the work and challenge of vitality can be described in terms of program and priorities, there's a theological core to the challenge for many mainline churches. When it comes to answering the core questions, there's an absence of real conviction about God, about God's word, and about what God has done and is doing in Jesus Christ. That last point is the emphasis of the second part of the reading, verses 14 - 16, about the work of Christ. Lacking focus on God and God's Word, lacking clarity and

conviction about Jesus Christ, it is difficult for oldline Protestant churches to gain real traction. They tend to become "over against" groups, defining themselves by what they are not, e. g. the Religious Right or Fundamentalists. So these verses offer preachers an opportunity to get to the heart of the matter.

Mark 10: 17 - 31

Again, the setting is the journey, the journey of Christ to Jerusalem. And again, an encounter with someone on the journey provides Jesus a teaching opportunity with his disciples, who remain predictably obtuse. A man who is wealthy in two ways, materially and in his observance of the commandments, comes to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Simple, says Jesus, let go of everything in which you find your security, whether your possessions or your sense of great virtue, and come and follow me. Simple but not so simple. At one level the text is about wealth and possessions. Sometimes preachers and listeners turn this into another thing to do or achieve, "sell all that you have and give it to the poor," as if such final and thorough divestment is the great work that will win admittance to the Kingdom. I tend to think Jesus is not asking another and super-human achievement, but letting go of all of that in which a person has found security and his life, leaving that behind and following Christ. So, in that sense, it is not just about wealth but about trust and where does your trust, ultimately, lie. Where is your security, ultimately, found? The poor disciples are again stunned and confused. It ain't easy, particularly in Mark, being a disciple. They never seem to get it. Peter points out everything they have given up for Jesus, clearly anticipating that this deserves a reward. Jesus says, don't worry, but do be prepared for surprises. For "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." Things are not what they seem to be (which takes us back to Job). One thing that can be said for Mark's portrait of the disciples is that it provides a sort of comfort to us in our own missing-the-point obtuse and confused following of Christ.