

Weekly Reading – Monday, October 6, 2008

In the spotlight here are the lessons for Sunday, October 12, 2008, Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost and Proper 23. Here in Canada, where I'm teaching this year, this Sunday is the day before Thanksgiving. In the States it is part of the Columbus Day weekend.

Isaiah 25: 1 – 9

This is a song of rejoicing for the great things that God has done. But notice, as least in the first couple of verses, what the great things are: humbling a city, reducing it to ruin. In bringing about such ruination, the "song of the ruthless" has been stilled and God has lifted up the poor and the oppressed. Here is a God who takes sides! Here, moreover, is praise for "great works of God," which are not all sweetness and light, but hard and heavy with judgment. So often, too often I'd say, when we speak of what God has done or is doing, it is only the positive that can be mentioned. Recall the famous aphorism of A. N. Whitehead, "He who does not know God as enemy cannot know God as friend." To identify God only with what we consider positive domesticates God and the gospel. In the last three verses, which appear in the lectionary as an Easter text, the vision is of the heavenly banquet, the great feast upon God's holy mountain. It is this that ties this text to the gospel lesson, the parable of the wedding banquet. Even there, it is not all sweetness and light, for one of the guests is given the boot.

Philippians 4: 1 – 9

This is the fourth and final lesson from the lectionary's quick tour in what is perhaps Paul's warmest and most joyous letter. The nine verses fall into three different sub-sections. The first, vs. 1 - 3, are some words of advice and exhortation to the congregation at Philippi, including mention of several women who Paul notes have labored at his side in the cause of the gospel. As later verses in this reading are easy, too easy, to detach from a particular context, these first verses remind us that Paul writes to a real church, with real people, who are at least in some cases really at odds with one another! The gospel does not float free at the 30,000 foot level. It is rooted in the lives of particular people, communities and contexts. The second section of the lesson, vs. 4 - 7, is certainly among the most beautiful and memorable portions of any letter of Paul. Lest it be reduced to happy talk ("Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say Rejoice," and "do not be anxious about anything") keep in mind that Paul, when he writes, is in jail. Moreover, these words are framed from a particular perspective, namely, "The Lord is near," that is an eschatological perspective. The present world is passing away. A new age has broken in among us. The final section and verses, 8 - 9, are admonition pure and simple, beautiful too, but also easily reducible to mere pious sentiment. Still Paul is unafraid, this is evident in a variety of places in his letters, to offer himself as a role model. He knows the power of role models and our need for examples.

Matthew 22: 1 – 14

I was visiting recently with the great preacher, Fleming Rutledge, who is also teaching on a short term basis here at one of the schools of the Toronto School of Theology. She lamented

that so often the main message from the churches of her tribe, Episcopal, is "God welcomes all, accepts all, loves all." I asked what was wrong with that? "It's okay as far as it goes, it just doesn't go far enough. It doesn't address our sin, our evil or the world's evil, it says nothing of what God has done to change things." She is of course quite right. Fleming and this gospel lesson challenge our theologies of inclusion when inclusion entails no repentance and expects no new life, when inclusion is not serious about evil and sin. The great feast is inclusive, vs. 9, "Go to the street corners and invite anyone you can find to the banquet." But the parable does not end there. To say, "you're welcome, you're invited, all are included," is necessary but not sufficient. When the king enters the banquet hall and looks around he sees that one guest is not properly attired. Okay, this is not about clothes, not about the well-to-do, well-turned-out versus the homeless or down-and-out. From God's point of view, you may be attired in high fashion but clad in rags! Preachers may need to make this clear, dispelling a kind of literalism, even if one were to wish it not to be the case. It is about "putting on new life in Christ." It is about grace requiring a response. It is about going beyond, "Everyone is welcome," to say that all things are made new in Christ and those who presume upon God's hospitality will get the old heave ho. Something is expected.