

Weekly Reading – Monday, October 12, 2009

October marches on. We're looking here at the lessons of the Common Ecumenical Lectionary for Sunday, October 18, 2009, which is the Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time and Proper 24.

Job 38: 1 - 7, (34 - 41)

In this third reading in a series from the Book of Job, God finally speaks, "out of the whirlwind." In a speech that runs for four chapters, God poses question after question. It's all questions. This might be a good Sunday for a sermon on the Bible as, less a book of answers, and more a book of questions. The Bible raises questions about the answers we have already formulated and agreed upon and take to be THE TRUTH. Besides all the poetic questions here in Job, the Bible is full of other great, resounding, eternal questions. Another feature of God asking the questions relevant to our own time, is that it reverses the contemporary inclination to imagine that it is God who must give an account of himself to us mortals. Our doctrines of God tend to revolve more around us, rather than we revolving around God! God's long speech prepares the way for the final reading, next week, Job's (very) brief answer.

Isaiah 53: 4 - 12

The typological Old Testament option is again from the Suffering Servant Songs of the prophet Isaiah, perhaps the most important collection in Scripture for the church's understanding of the person and work of Christ. In a certain respect, it correlates to Job, for an innocent man is judged guilty and punished, which like Job, challenges, if not refutes, the conventional wisdom, that suffering is always a punishment for sin. One cannot read this without thinking of the great spiritual, "He Nev'h Said a Mumbling Word."

Hebrews 5: 1 - 10

And yet more on suffering! Hebrews 5: 8, "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered." If the idea that suffering is a punishment for sin can be taken too far (many times suffering isn't a punishment for sin, many times the innocent do suffer), so also the idea that suffering is redemptive can be distorted (see Mel Gibson). The emphasis in Hebrews is less on Christ's suffering, really, than on the nature of his priesthood, which shares our human lot and condition wholly, including suffering, to transform it once and for all. As Hebrews continues, the author challenges the idea that sacrifices for sin and atonement must be made over and over, a notion that leads to salvation by works, works, and more works. No, he says. Christ has done it once and for all. Trust this and live boldly and gratefully.

Mark 10: 35 - 45

For some reason the lectionary omits the third prediction of the passion, giving us only the by now predictable missing-the-point response of the disciples. One of the themes in

congregational renewal work these days is a, "Shift from membership culture to discipleship culture churches." Well, if you take Mark seriously, the discipleship bar is not set very high! In fact the disciples sound quite a bit like the worst of so-called membership culture church, that is, concerned with place, status and prerogatives. James and John end run the other ten, to get their bid in first. "Teacher we want you to do whatever we ask of you," and proceed to request leading jobs in the new administration which they assume Jesus is soon to inaugurate in Jerusalem. "You don't know what you're asking," he tells them. This gives way to a lesson on leadership in which Jesus speaks of being servants, not lording it over others. Note that Jesus did not deny the aspiration of James and John for greatness. He does, however, redefine the nature and practice of greatness. Nor does servanthood mean self-abasement or loss of any real sense of self. It means placing oneself in service, first to God, second to humankind.