

Weekly Reading – Monday, October 26, 2009

Eghads and alas, we turn to November and the lessons for Sunday, November 1, 2009. Preachers have a choice between the lessons for All Saints Day (November 1) and those for Proper 22 or the Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time. I will go with the latter.

Ruth 1: 1 - 18

This lesson opens a short, two week, series from the Book of Ruth, and in doing so continues the lectionary's excursion in the area of wisdom literature. This opening reading sets the stage for the action to follow, doing so in a couple of ways. First, we learn that this is an inter-cultural family, with Hebrews inter-marrying with Moabites, being Orpah and Ruth. Second, it's a family that is down on its luck in a big-time way, with all the men kicking the bucket, from Naomi's husband to her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. The upshot is three women alone, which spells v-u-l-n-e-r-a-b-l-e. Naomi does the sensible thing, telling her daughters-in-law that she had nothing for them, and they are best advised to go back to their own people. Orpah does but Ruth (famously) clings to her Naomi's side. "Where you go, will go; where you lodge I will lodge." Thus is the stage set for a story of human risk-taking and divine purpose. Both Naomi and Ruth prove resourceful and gutsy. Meanwhile, God's plans and providence are at work on behalf of the vulnerable. Ruth, will become, the grandmother of David, and the ancestor of Jesus. God works in mysterious ways. Moreover, God is not it seems into ethnic or tribal purity. Ruth the Moabite becomes a crucial actor and link in God's plan. Ruth shows us that human courage and trust in God aren't an either/ or, but a both/ and.

Hebrews 9: 11 - 14

This is the fifth of seven readings from a series in the Book of Hebrews. Once again the general theme is the contrast between the effectiveness and finality of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf and the in-effectiveness of the cult and of animal sacrifice. The contrast is the "once for all" nature of Christ's work and the repetitive, ceaseless, anxious, do-overs of the human operation of religion. There is a wonderful way, as Barth never tires of pointing out that Christianity is against religion, insofar as religions are human systems for getting on God's good side. In this sense all sorts and varieties of human activity take on the aura and aspect of "religion" in the bad sense of that word, which was Barth's understanding of it. Religion is all the stuff we do or are told we ought to do to get God or some other spiritual power working for us. Faith, according to Barth and Hebrews, is trust in what God has done once and for all in Christ. Religion in this construal is anxiety-driven and includes all such human striving. Faith is trust-based and invites us to live with confidence and (one of Hebrews favorite words) boldness.

Mark 12: 28 - 34

The locus of action has shifted now, from the long journey to Jerusalem that began back in chapter seven of the Gospel and ended with Jesus' entry to the city in Mark 11, to teaching and conflict in Jerusalem during the final days of Jesus' earthly ministry. So we have gone

from the early part of Mark, the generally positive Galilean ministry, to the journey and its teaching about discipleship to the ever obtuse disciples, to the final testy phase of teaching and challenge in Jerusalem where the storm clouds now gather thick and dark on the horizon. This text features one of the less testy encounters as a scribe asked Jesus which is the greatest of the commandments. Jesus' summary follows the Decalogue in its dual emphasis on loving God (the first tablet) and loving neighbor (the second tablet) and the inextricability of the two. The scribe complements Jesus and also agrees that this is more important than "burnt offerings and sacrifices," which can be linked to the Hebrews text, although do that link with care. On one hand, we see that stereotypes of Judaism as all about animal sacrifice are inadequate, but on the other it isn't enough to say Christianity is summed up by "higher commandments" alone (see Hebrews, Christ has done something). The final line is wonderful and suggestive, as Jesus says to the scribe, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." What does that mean? That knowing the commandments and doing them are two different things? That having the right answer and following Jesus are worlds apart? That, as with the rich man in Mark 10, religion is not our achievement but our loving and trusting God completely and wholly? Sermon title? "Close Only Counts in Horseshoes".