

Weekly Reading – Monday, November 3, 2008

Focus now is the lessons for Sunday November 9, 2008, which is Proper 27 and the Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time. So we're bearing down on year's end, both liturgical and calendar, and turn in the gospel readings to the three amazing parables in Matthew 25 that compose Jesus' final teaching.

Amos 5: 18 - 24 or Wisdom of Solomon 6: 12 - 16

The Lectionary offers several options for the Old Testament reading, including in addition to those listed above, Joshua 24: 1 - 3a, and Wisdom of Solomon 6: 17 - 20. The Amos reading, in which the fiery prophet challenges those who call for the Day of the Lord, expecting it will be light and vindication, by saying it will be darkness, night and judgment. In other words, it is full frontal assault on complacency, one that goes on to assault the self-serving liturgical practices of 8th century Israel and calls for justice to roll down like might waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. The assault on complacency goes well with the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids, the gospel lesson. But so too do the Wisdom of Solomon texts go well with the Parable, and do so without the white hot anger of Amos. Both draw on the Wisdom tradition and the presentation of Wisdom as a feminine figure. Both invite seekers of wisdom to turn to lady wisdom and be enlightened. Use of one of the Wisdom of Solomon texts, instead of Amos, might provide a counter-balance to the Parable's emphasis on female figures who are "foolish," by presenting us with the wise woman.

I Thessalonians 4: 13 - 18

This, the next to last, in a series of epistle lessons from I Thessalonians addresses a pastoral concern with full on Christology. The pastoral concern is the fate of those who have died before the return of Christ. What will happen to them? Will they be included in the resurrection of the dead? "We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus all those who have fallen asleep in him." This is the kind of text that historical-critical approaches to the Bible successfully allow us to explain and dismiss as relevant in their "original historical context." What might a post-modern reading of such a text, where the meaning is not in the text's past but in its present and future, look like? It would certainly include themes of assurance and ultimate victory. It would also include themes of mystery as the images Paul uses really burst beyond the literal to the metaphoric and symbolic, in the best sense of those words. Most of all, it seems that these words affirm the hope and conviction that is gracefully articulated in the Creed of the United Church of Canada, "In life, in death, in life beyond death, we belong to God." Or in Paul elsewhere, "In life and in death, we are the Lord's." Rest assured.

Matthew 25: 1 - 13

But don't let your sense of assurance (see comments above on I Thessalonians) become complacency and end up like the foolish bridesmaids whose oil had run out before the bridegroom's arrival. What is "wrong" with this text is that the "wise bridesmaids" refuse to share! How can this be Jesus talking like this? How can this be Christian, pointing to the

example of those who refuse to share with others in need? Aren't we supposed to share? What's wrong with this picture? Yes we are to share with others, but it turns out there are some things that cannot be shared, some things we can't give to others or do for them. There are some things that we each have to do for ourselves, where we have to carry our own water, so to speak. One of these is faith, another is spiritual growth and maturity. Oil here is a metaphor for both. Sure the faith of others can help and inspire us, but when push comes to shove, we can't borrow faith from someone else or substitute another's faith for our lack. Neither can we, at the last minute, gain wisdom of heart or spiritual maturity. These are the product of a life of integrity, responsibility, and doing one's own work. Matthew--this parable appears only in Matthew--is deeply concerned about freeloaders in faith, those who presume upon grace (see the Parable of the Wedding Garment), and who have not done their own work. He warns that an end will come, time will run out, and when it does turning to others to bail us out will be of no avail. This parable is a good antidote for Christians and churches (and families) where compassion has become "sloppy agape," and turned into co-dependency. church.