

Comments

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 12, 2010

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Jeremiah 4:11-12,22-28

NRSV

Our reading is verses selected from a poem. God, speaking through Jeremiah, warns that a foe “from the north” (v. 6, probably the Babylonian army) is approaching. The people of Judah have not heeded God’s call for conversion, so God expresses his anger through invasion. False prophets have deceived Judah into complacency (v. 10), but the enemy marauds like a “lion” (v. 7) in the north of the land. The political leaders will lack courage and the religious ones will be “appalled” (v. 9) when the army arrives. God’s judgement will sweep over the land like a “hot wind” (v. 11, a sirocco). (A normal wind was used to “winnow or cleanse”, v. 11, to separate the wheat from the chaff.) The enemy, with his chariots and cavalry, will come like a “whirlwind” (v. 13) and “swifter than eagles”. There is still a chance for conversion but the people, stubbornly set in their ways, will not heed God’s call (v. 14). Judah will be besieged, for she “has rebelled against me, says the LORD” (v. 17). The people’s conduct has brought “doom” (v. 18) upon them. In vv. 19-21, Jeremiah tells of his mixed emotions. Even though devoted to his people, God has called him to announce destruction and punishment. May the disaster be as short as possible! How “foolish” (v. 22) and “stupid” his people are! They may have intellectual knowledge of God, but true “understanding” is living lives inspired by his truths.

Vv. 23-28 present another picture of the coming devastation. It will be as though the earth has returned to its primordial un-ordered (chaotic) state, “waste and void”; the scene will be shocking to “the heavens”. The “fruitful” (v. 26) land of Israel will be utter “desolation” (v. 27), incapable of supporting a population (“there was no one at all”, v. 25), and unable to feed even the “birds”. But this will not be the complete “end” (v. 27c) of life on earth, for some (not necessarily people of Judah) will see the disaster and “mourn” (v. 28). Those remaining will see the darkening of the skies (“the heavens above [will] grow black”) as though the end times have come. In the final images (vv. 30-31), Jerusalem is personified – as a prostitute dressed to seduce the enemy – but the city will suffer great anguish, like a woman in childbirth.

Psalms 14

NRSV

This psalm laments the breakdown of moral order. “Fools” are not atheists, but rather those who deny that God is concerned with human behaviour. (Proverbs 10:23 contrasts the “fool” with the “person of understanding”.) To the psalmist, the world is full of such fools, people who are “corrupt” (v. 1) and do terrible things. God, he says, sees no one who seeks to follow God’s ways (v. 2). V. 4 asks: do these wicked people not understand God at all? (Micah 3:2-3 too speaks of preying on the godly as eating them.) But (v. 5) the ungodly will be “in dire

alarm” (Revised English Bible), for God is in the community of those who follow his ways. Even though the godly seem to be *under the thumb* of the deviants, God will protect them. Oh that God, whose earthly residence is the Temple (“Zion”, v. 7) would deliver the oppressed from the ungodly! When he does, all Israel, Jacob’s descendants, will rejoice.

1 Timothy 1:12-17

NRSV

The author has warned against false teachers (“teachers of the law”, v. 7) who indulge in elaborations on, and deviations from, the faith (in the sense of the *facts* of Christianity) rather than living the kind of life these truths demand. “Love” (v. 5) should be the basis for Christian conduct – through personal integrity, “a good conscience” and “sincere faith”. Mosaic “law is good” (v. 8) but those who have “understanding” (v. 9), who lead Christ-like lives, have no need of it.

Now, in vv. 12-17, the author speaks as Paul. God has given his free gift of love to Paul, even though he previously distorted God’s message (“blasphemer”, v. 13) and persecuted Christians. God showed him mercy because he did not know Christ, “had acted ignorantly in unbelief”. The doctrine that “Christ ... came into the world to save sinners” (v. 15) is found in the gospels; it is worthy of belief (“sure”). Paul is the greatest of sinners (“foremost”) for his pre-conversion activities, but God pardoned even him. (God did seek out Paul.) As such, he is a prime “example” (v. 16) for all who come to believe, who are converted. As “King of the [earthly] ages” (v. 17) and yet “immortal, invisible”, God is transcendent.

Luke 15:1-10

NRSV

Jesus is keeping company with “tax collectors and sinners”, people avoided and despised by apparently godly people like “the Pharisees and the scribes” (v. 2). Their observation (v. 2) begs the question: *are any beyond God’s mercy?* Tax collectors were known for their unethical behaviour. The Roman authorities contracted out collection of taxes; how a tax collector got the money was up to him. Usury, fraud and excessive profits were common. Tax collectors worked for tax farmers, who were usually foreigners. As such, they were ritually unclean.

Now Jesus defends associating with these people, using parables. Our reading includes two: vv. 4-6 and 8-9. Jesus asks *if you had many and lost one, wouldn’t you search until you found it?* expecting the answer *of course I would!* He explains the parables in v. 7 and v. 10: God is shepherd/housewife; the lost sheep/coin are people who repent, who turn to God. God willingly accepts them; in fact, he rejoices, as does the community (“friends and neighbours”, vv. 6, 9)! Neither the sheep nor the coin can find their owner; God cares about those unable to find him; he seeks them. But, as so often in a parable, there are twists to them which helps people remember them: what shepherd would leave his flock “in the wilderness” (v. 4)? The Pharisees would find God symbolized by a woman as outrageous, and first-century shepherds were considered lawless and dishonest. (The *coin*, v. 8 was a *drachmas*, a day’s wage.) Would a shepherd really care about one sheep out of 100? God is like that.