

Comments **Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost September 19, 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 8:18-9:1

NRSV

Precise dating of this passage is not possible, but the closing years of the 600s is likely. These were times when the leaders and people of Judah, the southern kingdom, had been straying from God's ways for generations. They had formed alliances with foreign countries (e.g. Egypt) in the hope of avoiding invasion from the north (probably from Babylon, but the Scythians, a war-like tribe from near the Black Sea, were probably also a threat to regional stability). In earlier readings, we have seen Jeremiah link religious apostasy with these policies – for through contact with foreigners, Judah had adopted their ways and their gods.

Jeremiah is *sick at heart* (8:18), distressed over Judah's conduct. He sees Judah as doomed, for she has not heeded God's call for conversion back to his ways. At the last moment (or after raids on their cities have started), they realize their calamity, and cry: has God (their "King", 8:19) left his earthly dwelling in the Temple in Jerusalem ("Zion"), i.e. deserted them? (He was believed to dwell in the Holy of Holies, above the altar.) In 8:19b, God ("me") interrupts, speaking through Jeremiah; the people have "provoked" God by their adoption of foreign gods and ways. 8:20 may speak of a year of drought, but more likely of the end of the *good times*. Jeremiah really loves his people ("my ... people", 8:19, 21, 22), so it really hurts him to see them suffer. He asks: is there not a way of restoring them to health? ("Balm", 8:22, a resin from a tree which grew east of the Jordan ("Gilead"), was used for medicinal purposes.) He can't weep enough for Judah (9:1); whether he means "slain" literally or figuratively is unknown. In 9:2, he wishes that he could avoid this place of disaster, be almost anywhere else, for the people are "adulterers" and "traitors": they are totally corrupt.

Psalms 79:1-9

NRSV

Invaders have entered the land God gave to Israel ("your inheritance"); they have sacked the "temple" and "laid Jerusalem in ruins" (probably in 587 BC). Vv. 2-3 tell, in exaggerated tone, the fate of the people of Judah. Perhaps v. 3a is an allusion to the practice of pouring the blood of a sacrificial victim round the base of the altar. Judah suffers great shame: she is a "taunt" (v. 4, or laughingstock) to "our neighbours" (and in taunting God's people, v. 12, the enemy taunts God.) The invasion is seen as God's punishment for ungodliness: he is intolerant ("jealous", v. 5) of such behaviour. Will he be angry for ever? Please, God, turn your anger on other nations who "do not know you" (v. 6), do not live godly lives (not that Judah has been doing so!); "pour out" (v. 6) their blood instead. ("Jacob", v. 7, is Judah, the true Israel.) At Sinai, God said he would "remember" (v. 8) sins to several generations; please God, forget them!. V. 9 implies that God's reputation is at stake: if you don't help us, other nations will see you as ineffective in saving

us; your honour ("glory") will suffer. May you heed the "groans of the prisoners ... doomed to die" (v. 11). If you do afflict our enemies, we, "the flock of your pasture" (v. 13), will thank and praise you for ever.

1 Timothy 2:1-7

NRSV

At a time when Christians were suspect for not joining in worship of Roman gods, an act expected of all, the author urges them to pray for "everyone", including civil authorities ("kings ...", v. 2), so that Christians may live "a quiet and peaceable life", as *good citizens* yet godly ones. This, he says, is in accord with God's plan, for he wishes "everyone" (v. 4) to be saved, through knowledge of Christian "truth". God desires this for: (1) he is the "one God" (v. 5) for all people; (2) the "one mediator", Christ, shared in being human with all of us, and represents us all before the Father, and (3) gave his life as the price of freedom ("ransom", v. 6) for all. His life and death were "attested" (shown to be an authentic part of the plan) "at the right time", at the time chosen by God. Paul ("I", v. 7) was "appointed" by God to announce ("herald") this to all, genuinely sent out by him ("apostle") to teach doctrine ("faith") and the truth about God to everyone.

Luke 16:1-13

NRSV

As he continues to travel towards Jerusalem, Jesus says more about what is required of a disciple. Many in the crowd were poor, oppressed by the rich, so a story about a "rich man" (vv. 1-8a) would be popular. Jesus speaks in their terms, calling money "dishonest wealth" (v. 9) or *filthy lucre*. (A "manager", v. 1, negotiated and signed contracts on his master's behalf; the master was usually a (hated) absentee landlord.) Mosaic law forbade charging interest on a loan, but there was a way round this: the debtor in v. 6 had probably received 50 jugs of olive oil but the bill was for 100. The manager settles the account by forgiving the usurious interest, probably to his master's benefit, not his own. Both the "master" (v. 8, the rich man) and the manager are businessmen; the master praises the manager for acting "shrewdly" (the Greek word means *pragmatically*). Both understand prudent use of financial resources.

From elsewhere in the New Testament and from the Qumran literature, we know that "the children of light" (v. 8) are the spiritually enlightened: business-people are more pragmatic in their sphere than are disciples in affairs of the Kingdom. Then v. 9: Jesus advises accumulation of *heavenly capital* by providing for the needy. If one does this in one's own small way, God will see one as trustworthy regarding Kingdom affairs (v. 10) – and if one isn't, he won't. Being "faithful" now involves sharing possessions; one who doesn't now won't be entrusted with "true riches" (v. 11), i.e. the Kingdom. Financial resources are God's gift; they belong "to another" (v. 12), i.e. to him. "Your own" is your inheritance as God's children, i.e. eternal life. So in v. 12 Jesus asks: *if you have not managed your finances prudently, will God give you eternal life?* Then v. 13: one cannot make a god out of money and serve God. Disciples must serve God exclusively, using material resources for his purposes, sharing with the needy. The alternative is enslavement to materialism.