

Comments

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 26, 2010

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

www.montreal.anglican.org/comments/

© Chris Haslam

Jeremiah 32:1-3a,6-15

NRSV

King Nebuchadnezzar II ("Nebuchadrezzar") of Babylon made "Zedekiah" the puppet ruler of Judah in 597 BC, so it is now 587. Most of the preceding poems are about the restoration of Israel; here Judah's future is foretold. Chapters 37-38 give us the historical background. In 588, Egyptian armies arrived, temporarily lifting the siege of Jerusalem, and leading the people to think that deliverance had come, but Jeremiah warned that optimism was unwarranted. He set out to go from Jerusalem to "Anathoth", (v. 7, his home village), but was arrested and imprisoned on suspicion of desertion. Zedekiah has lightened his sentence to house arrest ("confined in the court ...", v. 2). When the Egyptians departed, the Babylonians again besieged Jerusalem. Anathoth is now in Babylonian hands.

Now God tells Jeremiah that his cousin "Hanamel" (v. 7) will come to him, asking him to buy his field. (To keep land in a family, the Law prescribed that if a man needed to sell any, a relative had the "right", and obligation, to buy it.) That Hanamel asks him convinces Jeremiah that "the word" (v. 8) is truly from God. Vv. 9-14 are the most complete record of a business transaction in the Bible. Similar deeds – a sealed and an "open copy" (v. 11) for easy reference – have been found in "earthenware jar[s]" (v. 14) in Egypt. Note the emphasis on "witnesses" (vv. 10, 12). This is the first mention of "Baruch" (v. 12), later Jeremiah's friend and the scribe who wrote down his words. That the transaction is conducted as though Judah is free, that the "deeds" (v. 14) are safeguarded to "last for a long time" – and God's words to the prophet – foretell that Judah does have a future, a time when people will again be free to buy and sell property in the land.

Psalms 91:1-6,14-16

NRSV

Perhaps a priest or temple prophet speaks vv. 1-2 to worshippers in the Temple. In vv. 3-4, God is depicted as a bird protecting his young. (A "fowler", v. 3, caught birds in a "snare", a large net.) The faithful, those who trust in God, are protected from demonic perils. At the end of the era, many others will die (v. 7) but the godly will not be harmed (v. 10) and will "see the punishment of the wicked" (v. 8). "Angels", (v. 11, God's agents), will protect the trusting from accidents, and will enable them to take the offensive in defeating evil (v. 13). In vv. 14-16, God speaks through a temple official, confirming the teaching of the earlier verses. Knowing God's name (v. 14), understanding his ways, includes seeking help from him: he will help those who seek it. Perhaps the "long life" (v. 16) is the king's: political uncertainty ensued when a king died.

1 Timothy 6:6-19

NRSV

Our passage is the concluding section of the book. In vv. 3-5, the author has again

warned against those who teach other than the body of faith passed down from Jesus and the apostles. He has charged these teachers with monetary gain for teaching falsehoods. Now, writing in Paul's name, he counters that there is "great [spiritual] gain" (v. 6) in teaching the truth; those who do so are content with enough to pay for necessities ("food and clothing", v. 8). But false teachers "who want to be rich" (v. 9) succumb to "senseless and harmful desires", and lead people astray from godliness. The true church leader is very different.

Now he addresses Timothy, a "man of God" (v. 11), spiritual leader of the Church. He sees Christian life as a "fight" (v. 12). Timothy "made the good confession" that Jesus is Lord at his baptism; Jesus made his "confession" (v. 13) of fidelity in his conduct when facing death. Timothy is to keep "the commandment" (v. 14, Christ's orders) until he returns at the end of the era, "at the right time" (v. 15), i.e. when God chooses. "Immortality" (v. 16) is an attribute of God. We cannot see him, but Jesus can and will reveal him. The author now speaks to affluent members of the community (v. 17). They should not set store in money, but rather in God, for it is God's gift. It is to be used in a godly way, for "good works" (v. 18) and sharing with the needy, for through such generosity they will attain eternal life, "life that really is life" (v. 19).

Luke 16:19-31

NRSV

Luke has described Pharisees as "lovers of money" (v. 14). Now Jesus expands on a tale from popular folklore to tell a parable. Only the rich could afford cloth dyed with "purple" (v. 19), and "fine linen" undergarments from Egypt. No moral judgements are made directly on the "rich man" and Lazarus (v. 20), but they are implied: v. 30 infers that the rich man, and his brothers, have not repented of their sins, but "Lazarus" (v. 21) means *God helps*, so he has. ("Dogs" ate the bread guests had used to wipe their plates and hands and then tossed under the table.) Vv. 22-23 tell of the reversal of fates after death, in contemporary Jewish terms: Lazarus goes to a place of bliss, beside "Abraham", the founder of God's covenant people, but the rich man roasts in "Hades" (v. 23, the Greek name for Sheol, the abode of the dead). Recall that Abraham was wealthy, and obedient to God's will.

In v. 27-28, the rich man changes tactics: upon learning that the gulf between him and Lazarus cannot be bridged ("a great chasm has been fixed", v. 26), he asks that his brothers be saved from the same fate. Abraham's answer (v. 29) amounts to: God reveals himself and his will in the Old Testament, so the "brothers" (v. 28) have been warned of the fate that awaits them. The Law required landowners, God's tenants, to share with the needy.

In v. 31, in speaking of "someone rises from the dead", Jesus is referring to his resurrection. Even then, "they" will not "repent" (v. 30). Like Lazarus, those whom God helps will come into his presence but, like the rich man, the ungodly will suffer irreversible punishment. God has revealed his will through "Moses and the prophets" (v. 29); those who neglect it will suffer after death. In this case, Jesus overturns conventional Jewish wisdom: it said that wealth was a sign of being blessed by God; if one was poor, one must be ungodly.