

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Isaiah 49:14-15

The second suffering servant song of Isaiah (Isaiah 49:1-7) almost immediately precedes our first reading today. This song provides the setting for our reading: *"¹ Hear me, O coastlands, listen, O distant peoples. The LORD called me from birth, from my mother's womb he gave me my name. ² He made of me a sharp-edged sword and concealed me in the shadow of his arm. He made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me. ³ You are my servant, he said to me, Israel, through whom I show my glory. ⁴ Though I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength, Yet my reward is with the LORD, my recompense is with my God. ⁵ For now the LORD has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb, That Jacob may be brought back to him and Israel gathered to him; And I am made glorious in the sight of the LORD, and my God is now my strength! ⁶ It is too little, he says, for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. ⁷ Thus says the LORD, the redeemer and the Holy One of Israel, To the one despised, whom the nations abhor, the slave of rulers: When kings see you, they shall stand up, and princes shall prostrate themselves."* Commentators see the suffering servant as representing not only an individual, but a people as well; the people of Israel (the 12 tribes, not the northern kingdom). When David was king, the city of Jerusalem had come to represent the entire nation; much as Washington, D.C. represents the government and actions of the United States today. The name Zion refers to the mountain upon which Jerusalem is built.

¹⁴ But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me." ¹⁵ Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you.

This is possibly the most touching expression of God's love in the entire Bible. God is, after all, our Father, and we are His adopted children. Saint John points this out in his gospel (John 3:16) where he says *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life."* The feminine image of God is natural in the setting of Jerusalem (Zion), a walled city, being pictured as being pregnant and filled with life.

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

As we finish our journey through 1st Corinthians for this cycle of readings, we are once again reminded by Saint Paul that divisions in the Church cannot be tolerated; we are all members of the one body. Because we all belong to the one body, we can't judge other

parts because in doing so we are judging ourselves. There is only one judge, Christ, and we must all answer to Him.

1 Thus should one regard us: as servants of Christ

The term used here for “servant” is *hypēretēs* which designated the rowers on the lowest bank of the galleys; it later came to mean “assistant” or “helper”.

and stewards of the mysteries of God.

The steward was the servant entrusted with the administration of the house. Saint Paul uses this term because he insists that he is administering his master’s property and not his own. The apostles are Christ’s stewards, charged with preaching divine revelation and not their own doctrines.

“There is a big difference between being a servant of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God. Anyone who has read the Bible can be a servant of Christ, but to be a steward of the mysteries one must plumb their depths. Paul was acting as a steward of the mysteries when he commissioned Luke, for example, to write his Gospel, and when he sent Timothy (1 Timothy 1:1-4) to sort out the Ephesian church. I would even dare to say that in Corinth Paul acted like a servant of Christ, whereas in Ephesus he became a steward of the mysteries of God (Ephesians 3:1-13).” [Origen (ca. A.D. 245), *Commentaries on 1 Corinthians* 2,18,10-16]

2 Now it is of course required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

The first and indispensable quality demanded of the apostle is that he be trustworthy, with a conscious devotion to God’s interests rather than his own.

“A steward’s duty is to administer well the things that have been entrusted to him. The things of the master’s are not the stewards but the reverse – what is his really belongs to his master.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 10,5]

3 It does not concern me in the least that I be judged by you or any human tribunal; I do not even pass judgment on myself; 4 I am not conscious of anything against me, but I do not thereby stand acquitted; the one who judges me is the Lord.

Human judgment of Paul is not his concern, he is answerable not to man but to God who will judge him on the faithfulness of his ministry.

5 Therefore, do not make any judgment before the appointed time, until the Lord comes, for he will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will manifest the motives of our hearts, and then everyone will receive praise from God.

The Lord will make known His judgment at the parousia.

“God will judge in His own good time. A judge is insulted if a servant presumes to pronounce a verdict before the judge makes the decision known.” [The Ambrosiaster (A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles* 1 Corinthians 4,5]

Gospel - Matthew 6:24-34

Our gospel reading for today comes from a collection of sayings of Jesus, sayings which are found in scattered contexts in Luke but are collected here in Matthew 6:19-34 and 7:1-27. The sayings in chapter six all have one common theme: singleness of purpose. The disciple should attend exclusively to the service of God and should not permit himself to be distracted from this concentration even by what men think are legitimate concerns. To place this in the full context, let's look also at verses 19-23: ¹⁹ *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be. ²² “The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light; ²³ but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be in darkness. And if the light in you is darkness, how great will the darkness be.”* This discussion of light and the eye reflects the physiological understanding at the time that there was a light within the eye which allowed a person to see and when that light was extinguished, blindness ensued. Likewise, if Christ, the Light of the World, does not shine within you, your soul is in darkness and evil is the result.

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

This is why bigamy is not allowed (humor). The disciple cannot have a divided loyalty. Although we think of mammon today as being money, the Talmud uses the term also to describe possessions in general. Taken together with verses 19-21 and the passage which follows, the radical character of this teaching becomes evident. Material possessions are a false god that demands exclusive loyalty but we are to have only one God (the first commandment). Any claims which material possessions have on an individual must be totally and completely repudiated. This doesn't mean that material possessions are evil and that we shouldn't own anything, but it does mean that God must be first in our lives and those possessions which we do have we should always be willing to sacrifice to God.

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat (or drink), or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?

“Worry” is more than simple thought and planning. Jesus is referring to the kind of worry which leads to a divided loyalty and ultimately to an exclusive concentration of possessions. Jesus doesn't deny the reality of human needs (see verse 32). In speaking of food, drink and

clothing, Jesus is saying that the person is more important than the external goods which sustain him.

26 Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they? 27 Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your life-span?

This does not excuse a person from earning a living; after all, birds work harder than most men in order to sustain themselves. It is not laziness that He recommends (see 2 Thessalonians 3:10). The audience to which these sayings are addressed is composed primarily of peasants and laborers and Jesus says nothing to them which invites them to abandon their life of incessant toil. What is recommended is that one's anxiety should not exceed the labor that is required to secure a living. It is not the use of the necessities of life that is discouraged, but the accumulation of material possessions. Verse 27 can also be translated "Can any of you by worrying add a single cubit to your stature?". Accumulated possessions do not prolong the lifespan or increase one's height.

28 Why are you anxious about clothes? Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. 29 But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them. 30 If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith?

For a proper attitude about clothing, Jesus uses the example of the wild flowers which bloom in profusion on the Palestinian hills; hills which are a dull brown most of the year. The bright display of color lasts only a few weeks but is very impressive while it lasts. Solomon's clothing, the proverbial example of wealth in the Bible, did not endure much longer than the wild flowers in the overall history of God's people. Jesus is telling them that their faith is not as deep as it should be (see also Matthew 6:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20).

31 So do not worry and say, 'What are we to eat?' or 'What are we to drink?' or 'What are we to wear?' 32 All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. 33 But seek first the kingdom (of God) and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides.

To make the provision of food and clothing one's major concern, an object of anxiety, is to live like the pagans who know no dedication except to the accumulation of goods in this world. God's righteousness is His plan for the salvation of the human race. The disciples must maintain their dedication to the reign of God and submit themselves to and cooperate with His plan.

34 Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil.

This saying is rather paradoxical to modern ears, especially since we are urged by society to "save for our later years". In fact, we are urged by the Church to provide for our old age so that

we do not become a burden upon our family and on society. What this saying does address though, is that if this “saving” becomes “accumulation”, it has detracted from the loyalty which we owe to God alone.

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