

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; Luke 16:1-13; I Timothy 2:1-7

Jeremiah 8:18—9:1. Jeremiah is popularly known as “the weeping prophet”. The Old Testament lesson for the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time is a perfect example of the reason Jeremiah received that sobriquet. It is a part of a much larger passage (7:1-20:18) that is centered on the grief and weeping of the prophet – and therefore of God – because of the alienating actions of the people and of the powers of Israel (Judah).

The prophet begins, “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?” The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved” (8:18-20). One cannot tell from the text whether it is God who is speaking or whether it is the prophet. But even if it is only the prophet expressing his grief over the failure of Israel to center its life in God, what is reflected in these words is the pathos of God, the divine husband weeping for his failed marriage to a wandering and rejecting wife (2:1-3:5).

Jeremiah tells us that God is sick with the unfaithfulness of God’s people – and that grief is transposed to the prophet, as well. God’s grief is the most profound grief over his people; his heart, the prophet tells us, is sick with that grief. The people feel abandoned by God, but God abandons them because they have abandoned God (“Why have the people provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?” vs. 19b). They no longer seek God’s intentions for their nation; neither the people nor the political, economic and religious powers long for justice, equitable sharing of wealth and a dynamic relationship with God. Rather, they lust after power, prestige, possessions and popularity. “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved”. It is now too late, for the people and powers have exhausted the possibilities for repentance and reform to be activated in their midst.

“For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me” (vs. 21). This is the most poignant statement of all. The people and the powers, through their own greed, lust for power and need to control have brought oppression and exploitation upon their nation. But there is no joy on God’s part in seeing God’s people brought so low. Rather, God is broken by what breaks God’s people; God is hurt over what has hurt God’s people. Therefore, there is no joy on God’s part (or on Jeremiah’s part, either). The destruction and pain that Israel will experience as a result of their rejection of God and God’s intentions for their nation creates no joy or even delight in revenge, but only grief and dismay over the inevitable results of their actions.

“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored” (vs. 22)? The phrase is well known because of its use in an African American spiritual, for as slaves, they too experienced in their own bodies the inevitable consequences of the lust for power, greed and self-justification of their owners, slave-traders and an entire society made rich by the enforced labor of their people. Gilead was known by the ancient Israelites as the location of healing ointments; so the prophet recognizes that there can be no physician for the consequences of the people’s actions that enslave them.

Therefore, the prophet ends with the words, “O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people” (9:1). Jeremiah, required to speak prophecies of the destruction that awaits Israel because of their refusal to act out God’s intentions for them, is so grieved at the fate they have brought upon themselves that he can only “weep day and night for my poor people”.

Psalm 79:1-9, along with the remainder of this psalm (vss. 10-13) is a plea to God by the psalmist for the avenging of Israel. The psalm is the pleading of its author for God to stop the defeat, sacking and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army, but also for God to visit retribution upon these enemies of Judah. The psalm is divided into four parts. Verses 1-4 is a description of the destruction of Jerusalem cast as a prayer to God. Verses 5-7 plead for the destruction of the Babylonian empire, instead. Verses 8-10 is a prayer, asking for God’s forgiveness of Israel for anything they might have done that would have contributed to God’s decision to permit his nation’s destruction. And verses 11-13 finish the psalm by returning to the psalm’s opening theme, again stating the terrible injustice done to Israel by Babylon and bargaining with God that Israel will now be faithful in following the Law if God rescues them.

The psalm begins, “O God, the nations have come into your inheritance (that is, Israel); they have defiled your holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins. They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the air for food, the flesh of your faithful to the wild animals of the earth. They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them” (79:1-3)!

This is a description of the conquering of Israel by “the nations”. The psalmist describes the unjust way that Israel has been treated and the embarrassment this must be to God. Therefore, the Psalmist calls upon God to seek revenge for the destruction of the temple and the city of God. “Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call on your name” (vs. 6), the Psalmist challenges God.

The writer goes on to state why Israel was defeated and treated to such ignominy. He reports that it was because of “the iniquities of our ancestors” (vs. 8a). But such sin on Israel’s part should be discounted by God, he argues, given the far greater sacrilege on the part of Israel’s attackers (vss. 8-9). After all, “why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God’” (vs. 10)? Rather, “let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants be known among the nations before their eyes” (vs. 10b). Hear the groans of the imprisoned Israelites (either in Jerusalem or in exile in Babylon). Return them to the land, restore their fortunes and free them from Babylonian tyranny. And in return, the people of Judah “will give thanks to you forever. From generation to generation we will recount your praise” (vs. 13).

Luke 16:1-13 is probably Jesus’ most difficult parable for 21st century Westerners to understand. But it provides one of the clearest pictures of what life was really like economically and politically in Israel at the time of Christ, and presents equally clearly the mission to which Jesus perceives his followers (the Church) to be called.

The players in the parable include the manager of a wealthy estate, the owner of that estate and merchants who owe money to that estate. This parable begins with the owner telling the manager to prepare a final accounting for the estate, because the owner is about to lay off that manager. The manager reflects about his future – “What will I do, now that my master is taking this position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg” (vs. 3). Having considered his alternatives, the manager calls in to his office all those merchants who owe money to the manager, offers them significant reductions in their debts if they immediately pay it off, receives their payment, and then destroys their notes. The owner, learning what the manager has done, commends him for his shrewd but deceptive action, and restores him to his position of manager. Then Jesus concludes, “For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal home” (vss. 8-9).

What is Jesus saying, and what does he mean? How can he instruct his disciples to use such tactics to make dishonest wealth? And what does all this have to do with Jesus’ compassion for the poor and his commitment to the full living-out of jubilee among his followers and throughout all Israel?

The problem one faces in reading this parable is that the average 21st century Christian is unfamiliar both with the economy of Jesus’ time (and how it could be taken advantage of by manipulative and “shrewd” people) and with the intricacies of Jubilee. Jesus, of course, in telling this parable expected his hearers to thoroughly understand how the economy really worked (because they lived within it) and to know the essential principles of Jubilee. Therefore, he needed to explain nothing about “the world as it is” and “the world as it should be” to his listeners. He could simply tell the parable, and those hearing it would connect all the dots.

Jubilee was essentially economic legislation. Jubilee had four essential elements in it – letting the land periodically lie fallow in order to restore itself, forgiving all debts every seven years, releasing all slaves every seven years, and redistributing the land so that all extended families received an equitable amount of the land every 49 years (the wealth of the nation and each family was in the land, for it was an agrarian culture). These four essential elements of Jubilee were all designed to periodically rebalance the national wealth so that power could not accrue nor wealth accumulate in the hands of a few while the remainder of the population sunk into increasing poverty and powerlessness. The Jesus in Luke was about the restoration of the entirety of Jubilee and thus the leveling of Jewish society so that there were no powerful and wealthy forces exercising domination over the rest. To Jesus, this was not simply an economic and political task, but a religious task as well – for only by eliminating poverty and powerlessness would the nation ever discover the spirituality and relationship with God that God had always intended Israel to experience. This was the world as God intended it to be.

But this was not Israel as it actually was! In the time of Jesus, there was both a significant and growing dichotomy between the peasants and the powerful. Between 60% and 70% of the wealth of Israel at any given time was owned and managed by 2% of the population -- Israel’s religious/political leaders, the Herodian nobility and the land owners (like the wealthy owner of this story), along with their bureaucrats or managers who managed these assets.

The peasants, on the other hand, made up between 83% and 93% of the population (according to whether economic times were good or bad); the peasantry was made up primarily of farmers, merchants and artisans. They perennially lived on the edge of economic disaster. Farmers, for example, didn't own the land they farmed but rented it from the land owners mentioned above. Typically, 50% of their harvest would be paid as rent to the land owner, 25% would go in taxes to Rome and the Herodian nobility, 10% went to the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, and 3% would go to the village. Thus, each farmer realized only about 12% of his harvest, which had to be spent both on the family's annual income and next year's seed.

The bottom rung of the Israelite ladder was the "expendables", whose ranks would swell during bad times and reduce in good times. These were the beggars, the widows and orphans, shepherds, the lepers and the ritualistically unclean. When the manager, considering his options, considered that he wasn't strong enough to "dig" nor was about to "beg", what he was considering was to leave his exalted place as a bureaucrat and instead become a farming peasant ("dig") or fall all the way down the hierarchy to become one of the expendables ("beg"). Neither option was one that he wanted to consider.

So what could he do? The manager's solution was ingenious. One of the ways that a bureaucrat like this manager would make money was by overcharging on a debt. The manager would have been paid a salary by the owner for managing his estate. But it would be legal for him to make additional money by overcharging on a debt. Such a practice had the rather intriguing name of "legal graft". Since a Jew was not permitted to charge usury, the way to make additional money was to overcharge. The owner would simply look the other way to this practice.

Obviously, that is what this man had done. A merchant may have borrowed 50 jugs of olive oil from the owner (that is, about 400 gallons) but the manager made out the bill for 100 jugs (800 gallons), the price for the additional 400 gallons being the "honest graft" of the manager. What the manager did in this situation was to tell the merchant to pay for 50 jugs of oil (thus, the manager surrendered his take), to receive the money immediately from the merchant and to then tear up the bill, so that there was no longer any paper trail that demonstrated that the original invoice had been written for 100 jugs rather than for 50.

This manager did this regarding each indebtedness owed to the owner. By doing so, everybody won. The merchants each paid about half of the bill they were obligated to pay, but had their entire bill forgiven. The owner both received all the money he was owed and received it all at one time (he didn't have to bother to collect it or to dun the merchant for payment). With the bills having been destroyed, it would have been impossible for the owner to have claimed as rightfully his the original contract (since the manager had sacrificed nothing but his graft of the total). But more than that, the manager had obliquely strengthened the owner's position in relation to these merchants, because by "forgiving" the manager's share of the debt and getting rapid payment of the remainder, he had increased these merchants' obligations and psychological indebtedness to the owner on which the owner might later trade. The owner's praise of the manager was his recognition that he had been outwitted by his manager, and placed the owner in the position of needing to restore the manager to his former position, precisely because of the business savvy he had demonstrated, and his improvement of the economic situation of the

owner. The manager had proven himself a more-than-valuable agent of the owner; consequently, he got his position restored, and now he neither needed to “dig” nor to beg!

Jesus concludes the parable with the words, “the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. For I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes” (vs. 8-9). The entire system of which the manager is a part, Jesus is saying, is exploitive by its very nature. It is committed, not to working for equitable distribution of wealth and the elimination of poverty (as is Jubilee and the Torah), but to greed and the exploitation of the peasants to enhance the wealth and power of both owners and their bureaucrats. And meanwhile, the peasants (including the merchants who out of necessity traded with this owner through his manager) are forced to live their lives trying to make ends meet, haggling and bargaining to keep the little that they have. What this manager had done by his astute negotiations with these merchants was that he had demonstrated to his owner, to the merchants (that is, the peasants) and to himself that he thoroughly understood this system and how to exploit it both for his own benefit and for the benefit of the owner, even though his actions may have seemed to be dishonest and deceitful. Thus, Jesus concludes, the people who most “get ahead” in this world are those who know how to manipulate and exploit the present economic system for their own benefit. Likewise, those who are working for “the world as God intends” need to be able to perceive reality as clearly as do “the children of this age” and use that knowledge and situation for the advancement of the justice and relational objectives of the kingdom of God.

With the conclusion of this difficult parable, the entire passage then almost ends with Jesus’ summarization, “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own” (vss. 10-12)?

Here Jesus draws out the implications of this parable. If one is to be a “kingdom person” and to authentically follow Jesus, it doesn’t matter whether he or she is an “owner”, a “manager”, a “merchant”, a “peasant” or even a “beggar”. What matters is which perspective of the world you are going to embrace, and which will you seek to practice in your continued relationships with both the people and the systems that surround you. Are you going to be wed to “the world as it is”, acting like those in the parable who are either seeking to exploit (the owner, the manager) or to exploit the exploiters (the merchants, the peasants as well as the manager)? Will your life and your engagement of the world be centered on greed, accumulation and power – even if that means truncating the Law? Or will your life be centered on “the world as God intended it to be”, not only believing in but actively and even shrewdly (having political “savvy”) working for a world of justice, equitable distribution of wealth, elimination of poverty, and authentic relationships with God and each other? You must make your choice.

For make no mistake, Jesus is saying. You must choose. And there is only one choice. “No man can serve two masters,” Jesus forcefully concludes. “For a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (vs. 13). No one can give one’s self to both worlds. One must choose if the “master” he

serves will be the priorities and assumptions of “this world” – committing yourself to gathering power, prestige, possessions and popularity for yourself. Or will the master you choose to serve be the Master and his commitment to the making real in every aspect of today’s world a kingdom of justice, shared wealth, the elimination of poverty and “to walk humbly with your God”? Which will you choose?

I Timothy 2:1-7 builds upon the emphasis Paul had made in the first chapter of his letter to Timothy. That opening emphasis had stressed that God had acted graciously through Christ in order to bring himself – Paul – to salvation. Although he was “the foremost of sinners”, God had miraculously intervened in his life through Christ, stopping him on the road to Damascus and then healing him of both his physical and spiritual blindness (his unwillingness to see that Jesus was indeed Lord and Savior). So, even though one might be “the foremost” of sinners, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”.

Now, having proclaimed that reality, Paul broadens his focus to the whole world. Paul asks Timothy and those who are under Timothy’s Episcopal authority, “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2:1-4).

Paul urges God’s people to be in prayer for the whole world. To pray for “everyone” does not mean to pray for every single person on the face of the earth (how could one possibly pray specifically for every person; we don’t even begin to know who “everyone” is), but rather “all types of people” (Jews, Gentiles, slaves, free, powerful, powerless, male, female, etc.). That this is what Paul means is made clear in his next phrase, “for kings and all who are in high positions”. He is not praying for each specific king by name, but for those generically who occupy the office of king or have been entrusted by society with other “high positions”. “Kings” and those “in high positions” are two “types of people”, as are “everyone”.

Paul suggests that we pray for those in authority. This is an intriguing request, particularly in the light of the Old Testament and Gospel lessons for this Sunday. Jeremiah speaks harsh words against both the people and the “powers”, indicating that they have “provoked (God) to anger” and must now stand the consequences of their actions. Having to punish both the people and their political, economic and religious powers breaks God’s heart, but it is the inevitable result of their respective commitments to greed, power and control. Likewise, in the Gospel parable for this Sunday, Jesus exposes the entire political, economic and religious systems of Israel as being exploitive, yet commends the manipulative and self-serving manager for his shrewdness in working out an equitable settlement of debt that ends up benefiting the owner the most. Through the use of this parable, therefore, Jesus calls upon his followers to be equally shrewd in making their social analysis of the world and acting on that analysis in ways that will benefit the kingdom of God rather than themselves.

Thus, in the three scripture lessons for the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, there are three distinct approaches to the political, economic and religious (“kings and all who are in high positions”)

powers of the time. Jeremiah prophesies against and proclaims judgment upon them, Jesus exposes and uses them in ways that call his disciples to responsible action, and Paul prays for them.

But this ambiguity of response is not simply between Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul. It is found within Paul himself. In the epistle lesson for today, he urges Christians to pray for the powers “so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity”. Elsewhere, he takes a different stance toward those in power. In Romans, Paul advises obedience to the political, economic and religious systems under which the Christians are living (Rom. 13:1). But in Ephesians and Colossians, he calls upon the church to be actively engaged in public life (1:10), proclaiming that Jesus is the authentic Caesar (not the current imposter in Rome) (1:20-23; cf. Col. 1:15-16, Rom. 8:34), and working as God’s ambassadors to bring the world’s political, economic and religious systems into conformity with God’s intentions for the world, even if that means peacefully resisting the authorities (Eph. 2-5). Thus, the same man urges his constituency to be obedient to the authorities, to pray for (and prayer includes not simply interceding for them but calling upon God to change their perspectives and actions), work to change and transform the authorities, and even to resist the authorities.

Which Paul do we believe and follow? The answer, of course, is “all of them”. What Paul has demonstrated in his epistles is the spectrum of strategies the church is to follow in its encounter with the political, economic and religious systems of any society. When these systems have created an atmosphere of peace and safety in which the church can flourish and justice is being realized, obey the authorities. When the systems are acting in unjust ways or are implementing policies unfavorable to the church, resist them and work for change. When the systems become committed to the destruction of the church (as in the time of persecution in which Ephesians was written or in which Jesus ministered), confront and expose the systems for the unjust, oppressive and exploitive systems they have allowed themselves to become. But in whatever public situation in which the church finds itself, be praying for and working for the transformation of those systems into an image of God’s intentions for society, recognizing that engagement in public life is an authentic mission of the church.

The next portion of the epistle lesson then goes through a rather startling transformation in its original Greek. Paul suddenly shifts from essentially a prose format into poetry. Although it is not terribly obvious in English, it is exceedingly clear in Greek. Paul writes, “For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all” (vss. 5-6a). Then, Paul comments rather defensively on the poem, “This was attested at the right time. For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth” (vss. 6b-7).

The sudden shift from prose to poetry suggests that this statement is not one that is original with Paul, but is rather a liturgical fragment that would be known to his Christian readers, a confession of faith perhaps used in the worship of the church. Because it is a well-known liturgy, people will recognize it when used in this context.

This liturgy makes three key confessions of faith. First, “there is one God” – the fundamental affirmation of both the Hebrew and Christian faiths (Deut. 6:4; Rom. 3:30; I Cor. 8:6; Gal. 3:20; Eph. 4:6).

Second, “there is one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human”. This statement causes the church to part company with Israel. There is one who arbitrates (mediates) between God and humanity, bringing the two who are estranged together again. That mediator is “Christ Jesus, himself human”. It is the intervention of Jesus of Nazareth that made it possible for humanity to be made once again at-one with God; it is not Moses or the Law or obedience to the works of the Law or even other supposed pagan deities. It is this one man – Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ (or “Caesar”). It was not a god or a demigod, but a human being who is also God – fully and truly both a human and God – who could act as mediator between God and humanity to bring them together again. The heavy emphasis by Paul on the humanity of Jesus, both elsewhere in his epistles and here, was likely because of the emergence of a pre-Gnosticism throughout the church that denied the true humanity of Jesus, turning him into a demigod.

Third, “who gave himself a ransom for all”. “There is one God, there is one mediator” and now, “there is one who gave himself a ransom for all”. It was through Jesus’ death on the cross that he did the act necessary to assuage the pride, lust for power, hunger after wealth, need to dominate and control the people and systems that estranged them from God (here Paul is thinking of the sacrificial system of the Israelite religion that required the death of an innocent and pure lamb to atone for the sins of the people). It was Jesus’ death that enabled mediation to occur, and for people and the systems to be united once again with God (Mark 10:45; Rom. 3:24; Eph. 1:7; Titus 2:14).

This magnificent statement of faith that provides the formula for what the church is supposed to be proclaiming and acting upon in its engagement with people and nations and their systems is then followed by one of the most surprisingly defensive statement that appears in Paul’s letters. It is as if, in one fell swoop, the reader moves from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Why is Paul being so defensive? Is he feeling a threat from those to whom he is writing this letter? After all, if we accept the Pauline authorship of this letter, he is writing to a trusted friend and colleague, Timothy. Is Timothy being swayed by the influence of the Judaizers? If Paul is not the author, does this mean that there are those in Paul’s churches that are seeking to undermine the influence of Paul? We don’t know. But we do know, in reading such convictional language, that Paul is passionate about the message he is proclaiming, about the public mission to which he and his followers are called, and about the protection of the Church he has worked so hard to build. May all of us operate out of an equally lively passion!

(Copyright © 2010 by Robert C. Linthicum)