

Comments **Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost** **September 6, 2009**

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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Proverbs 22:1-2,8-9,22-23

NRSV

A proverb is a pithy statement expressing some truth in a striking and memorable way. This book is mostly instructions given by a scholar (or father) to a student (or son) on how to lead a moral life, with proper respect for God. Life involves choices; it is important that one be informed, trained and persuaded to make the right ones. The objective of life is attainment of wisdom, i.e. integrity in God's eyes. V. 4 says: "The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honour and life".

Now v. 1: a "good name" (reputation) matters more than wealth; "favour" (being esteemed) is also more valuable. But God's creative activity matters much more than achievement of wealth. Vv. 8-9 contrast the evil doers and the "generous", the kindly. Behaving in an unjust (ungodly) way leads to "calamity" (the Revised English Bible says "trouble"); God's anger, his wrath, will destroy the ungodly. (One reaps what one sows.) But those who are "generous" are "blessed", held in high esteem by God and honoured by him, because they share. V. 22 cautions against (1) *robbing* (in the broadest sense) those who are helpless ("poor"), and (2) ill-treating a "poor wretch in court" (REB). (The *law courts* were at the city *gates*.) Why? Because, in an ultimate sense, God is on the side of the underdog: he will "rob of life those who rob them" (REB), either by making the oppressors' lives miserable or by shortening their lives.

Psalms 125

NRSV

The superscription is *A Song of Ascents*: this psalm was probably sung by pilgrims travelling up to Jerusalem. The solidity of "Mount Zion" is seen as symbolic of the certitude enjoyed by God's people of his continuing care for them. The promised "land" (v. 3) was "allotted to the righteous" (those living in God's ways) when they entered it after the exodus. Ungodly rulers of Israel ("sceptre") – either Israelite or foreign – will no longer rule the land (or "wickedness" will disappear), removing the temptation for the godly to succumb to evil. V. 4 is a prayer: may God give goodness to the faithful. V. 5a warns: those who deviate from God's ways will be treated as "evildoers": their fate will be horrible. Hopefully, this will not affect Israel; she will have "peace".

James 2:1-10,(11-13),14-17

NRSV

The author has exhorted his readers to "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers" (1:22) of the gospel. He has taken caring for widows and orphans as an example. Now he expands on the responsibility of Christians to the disadvantaged. He challenges his audience: is your "favouritism", your partiality, consistent with belief in Christ, who in his glory makes nonsense of distinctions based on status?

He gives an example (vv. 2-3): if a stranger "comes into" your worship "assembly" don't you offer him a better seat if he is well dressed? You judge by appearances; you discriminate. But, he says (v. 5): remember Jesus' preference for the poor; they will have faith and inherit "the kingdom". Your conduct is the opposite of God's! (v. 6a) Perhaps he addresses the poor in vv. 6b-7. We are baptised into Jesus' name in baptism; his name is "invoked" over us. To discriminate against the baptised, God's people, is to "blaspheme" Christ's character and "name".

Then v. 8: the readers will fully comply with God's law, "the royal law" revealed by Christ, if they keep the commandment Jesus called the "greatest and first" (Matthew 22:38): to "love one's neighbour as yourself". You break the law if you show "partiality" (v. 9), discriminate. Failing to love in any way makes one totally "accountable" (v. 10, literally: *guilty*). V. 11 is an example from the Ten Commandments.

Make the commandment of love that gives freedom your guide to conduct (v. 12). The person who fails to show compassion in life will be shown "no mercy" (v. 13) at Judgement Day, but one who is kindly will be treated compassionately. Then v. 14: what sense is there to claiming to "have faith" (freely accepting God's saving revelation) if you don't do God's will? Claiming such will not save you! For example (vv. 15-16), words alone do not suffice when material help is needed. V. 17 summarizes: faith must be *living*, accompanied by actions – else it is useless.

Mark 7:24-37

NRSV

In Galilee, Jesus has challenged official Judaism over the authority of non-biblical traditions and has taught that ritual purity is irrelevant. He now travels to the coast ("Tyre"), a largely Gentile area. The "woman" (v. 26) is Gentile by birth and of non-Jewish origin; she seeks healing for her daughter who (at least in contemporary understanding) is possessed by evil. In Jesus' statement (v. 27), the "children" are presumably Jews; Jewish writers sometimes referred to Gentiles as "dogs". Jesus says that he comes principally to Jews, but note that both Jews and Gentiles are at or near the table. The woman's witty retort (v. 28) shows that she has faith in him: there is a place for non-Jews in God's plan. Jesus accepts her claim (v. 29). The daughter is completely cured (v. 30).

After a circuitous journey through Gentile territory, Jesus heads towards Galilee (v. 31). A man with hearing and speech problems is brought to him. (Laying on of hands ("hand", v. 32) is known only in the Qumran, Dead Sea, literature and in the Church.) In doing the miracle, Jesus uses two symbols, one for deafness and one for speech. He touches the man's tongue with spittle (v. 33). Jesus communes with the Father, is moved with compassion ("sighed", v. 34) and orders the healing. The cure is immediate and again complete (v. 35). In v. 36a, Jesus hopes to avoid a partial understanding of him (as a miracle worker) but the good news spreads. The people's words: (1) allude to God's satisfaction with creation (v. 37b, Genesis 1:31) and (2) show that the Kingdom of God has begun: v. 37c is a quotation from a section of Isaiah on Israel's glorious future. The kingdom of God has already begun!