

Comments **Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost** **October 13, 2024**

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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Job 23:1-9,16-17

NRSV

Job, a faithful man, was wealthy with abundant progeny. But his faith may be because he sees his prosperity and his many children as divine providence. So God tests him, by stripping him of all he has and by ruining his health. In his distress, three friends have come to “console and comfort him” (2:11). He has cursed the day he was born (3:1ff) and has wished that he could escape from life. His friend Eliphaz has offered what he thinks is help: for Job to suffer as he does, he must have behaved badly towards other people. (This is impossible, for Job is of the greatest integrity.) To Eliphaz, the solution is simple: Job should pay attention to God’s word, repent of the sins he has committed, and God will restore him to divine favour. Because God is impartial in his justice, Job would be forgiven his misdeeds, would find joy, and his prayers would be answered.

Now Job doesn’t really answer God. Instead, he seeks to find God, to “lay my case before him” (v. 4), to argue his cause as in a courtroom. God would find some faults in his conduct, but he would listen (v. 6). God is reasonable: he would acquit Job, “an upright person” (v. 7), of the charges which have caused his suffering. But Job can’t present his case to God: he can’t find him (vv. 8-9). Eliphaz is wrong: Job has never deviated from God’s ways (v. 11). He has always obeyed God’s commands (v. 12). But God is sovereign: he does what he wills (v. 13): he will bring to fulfilment whatever he intends for Job (v. 14). That God can seem so arbitrary in his actions terrifies Job (v. 15); even more frightening to him is God’s inaccessibility. Job feels deserted by God: “God has made my heart faint” (v. 16). The seeming absence of God is a horrible torment to one who loves him and is used to experiencing him. May he, Job, simply cease to exist!

Psalms 22:1-15

NRSV

Jesus quoted the opening words of this psalm on the cross. In his suffering, the psalmist feels deserted by God, despite his cries for help day and night (v. 2). Even so, he convinced that God is “holy” (v. 3). His forebears trusted in God (as he does), and God helped them (v. 4), so may God help him now (v. 5). His misery is aggravated by those who mock him; they see his suffering as a sign of God’s ineffectiveness: they jeer and grimace (“make mouths”, v. 7) at him. But he is convinced that God has been with him since his infancy (vv. 9-10); only God can help him now. His detractors behave like savage animals, seeking to devour him (vv. 12-13). (Bulls from “Bashan” were particularly strong.) His suffering (v. 14-15) may be physical and mortal: his dry “mouth” may be due to fever; it leaves him weak. His detractors are so sure he will die that they have already auctioned off his clothes (v. 18). May God help him soon (v. 19). When God restores him, he will spread the word of God in the community and will praise him in the “con-

gregation” (v. 22), the Temple. God will rescue him, and all “nations” (v. 27), and those who have died (v. 29). “Future generations” (v. 30) too will be told of God’s saving deeds, and will proclaim them.

Hebrews 4:12-16

NRSV

The author has written that Christ, the sympathetic and trustworthy “high priest” (4:14), took on being human in every way, being tested by suffering. Through his death he is able to restore us to oneness with God, freeing us from the power of evil forces (2:14-18) – as his readers are now tempted to desert the faith.

Now he continues: the “word” (4:12, *logos*, essence, principle) of God produces life (“living”) and is “active”: it is able to differentiate between the faithful and the errant. It has properties only God has: it can judge our innermost beings (“intentions of the heart”). “It” (God) knows each of us and sees us clearly; we “must render an account” (4:13) of our fidelity to him. If (and when) we err, God has provided a remedy for our sin, through Jesus, the “great high priest” (4:14), who is transcendent (“passed through the heavens”). So we should “hold fast” to our (baptismal) creed (“confession”). Jesus is a very special “high priest” (one who makes sacrifice to obtain our union with God), for he can “sympathize with our weaknesses” (4:15), because he has been “tested as we are”, but without erring. So let us confidently present ourselves before God (“throne of grace”, 4:16), to receive both forgiveness of past sins and his gifts to help us now and in the future.

Mark 10:17-31

NRSV

Jesus continues to teach about what it means to follow him. The man kneels as to a master; such a show of piety is abnormal. (People stood to pray.) Perhaps Jesus’ response (v. 18) is a careful one. Rabbis (teachers) were not usually addressed as “good”; only God is good. The man insists that he has always kept those of the Ten Commandments which deal with relationships among people (vv. 19-20), and Jesus believes him (“Jesus ... loved him”, v. 21), but what about his relationship with God? Jesus seems to recognize that the man puts his trust in his own piety and wealth, in his achievements, but wealth stands in the way of his gaining oneness with God – so Jesus tests him (v. 21). The man’s shock and departure (v. 22) show that Jesus is correct. Wealth was seen as a sign of God’s favour, but in the man’s case, it gets in the way of true discipleship.

But we cannot save ourselves – only God can save us (v. 27). It is “impossible” for humans to enter the Kingdom through their own efforts, even when blessed with God-given possessions, as v. 25 says in a grotesque image. Peter’s words in v. 28 carry with them a question: *what is the reward of those who are faithful now?* Jesus answers: those who have given up their possessions and natural family for the sake of him and of his mission will receive much: in this life, they will share in the Christian community (although they may suffer); in the “age to come” (v. 30, in the kingdom), they will have eternal life. Finally v. 31: the “first” are those who have status now; the “last” are those who have left everything. In entering the kingdom, the “last” will be God’s obvious choice for admission.