

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

August 5, 2007

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost - Proper 13C 2007

In the name of our One ever creating, loving and sustaining God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I first read our readings for today, I thought to myself, “Could they have possibly chosen any cheerier readings than these?” With their relentless repetition of the reality of our human condition, they can be an invitation to despair. Amidst all the confusion of our modern lives, the message of “all is vanity” can be very frustrating.

The Book of Ecclesiastes is a strange book; it is probably the least “Jewish” of all the books in the Hebrew Bible. Although written as if King Solomon was writing it in the year 950 BC or so, it actually was written around 250BC or so. Why would one do that? Well something happened in 325BC – Alexander the Great conquered the known world. Every thing had changed and people were moving around and getting exposed to new ideas and ways of living. They had gone global. Does that sound familiar? Faced with this, Hebrew scholars, although writing in the “new way” of their times, were actually going back to the Wisdom tradition in their Scriptures and mining them in a way to point to a future within their faith tradition. Does any of that sound familiar?

In our Gospel lesson from Luke, Jesus is continuing on his journey to Jerusalem, teaching as he goes. We find him in a crowd and a man shouts out “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Jesus avoids this

invitation to be dragged into someone else's affairs. He doesn't want to trade his role as teacher for that of judge. He senses the greed that underlies the man's request for he replies, "Take care! Be on guard against all kinds of greed."

Jesus uses this interruption as a teaching moment: "One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Jesus will not be distracted by this other man's priorities; instead Jesus teaches about life – the simple joy of being! He emphasizes his point by telling the parable of the Rich Fool. From our readings from Ecclesiastes and Psalm 49, we can see that the wisdom literature of the Old Testament has a lot to say about wealth that Jesus is drawing on.

The rich man is a farmer who owns land. This emphasizes his wealth and his position in the community. His land has produced abundantly – so much so that he lacks a place to store his harvest. His barns aren't big enough. This is a miraculous harvest – God's doing. For farmers in biblical days their joy would be tempered by their realization that days of drought and poor harvests can follow such a miraculous harvest. Remember how Joseph saved the day by storing up the surplus of Pharaoh so that the people could be fed during the famine that followed? The rich farmer's problem is how to manage this miracle – what to do with the surplus? Notice with whom he consults. Himself!! Everyone else is excluded from this story.

In his soliloquy, he decides to tear down his old barns and build new ones that can hold this abundance. Why not simply build an addition or add another barn to the complex? He apparently thinks this abundance is permanent and is heedless of the possibility that tough times may follow. He talks to himself again and says, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat drink, be merry." The rich man has squeezed everyone out of the story. The miraculous harvest is his own doing so God is

squeezed out. The abundant harvest is to for him to enjoy for many, many years, so the community is out of his frame of reference also.

Jesus' listeners would know that God was there all the time. The Kingdom of God produced the abundant harvest. The prudent man would anticipate days of scarcity. The good man would understand his need to share the abundance with the community. By hoarding the abundance given by God for himself, the rich fool guarantees that others will suffer want. The rich fool has opted for the Epicurean life of eat, drink and be merry rather than prudent, generous and community oriented life taught by the wisdom tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures. The hedonist philosophy of the Epicureans is based on the concept that life is meaningless and thus self-gratification is the only thing that makes sense. The modern version is "He that dies with the most toys, wins." The rich fools "eat drink and be merry" raises in Jesus' listeners minds the specter of death.

This is where God re-enters the story. "You fool!" God says, "This very night your life is being demanded of you." In biblical talk, a fool is someone who denies the existence of God. God then poses a question: "And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" The question that preoccupied the rich fool remains: What is to be done with the abundance God has created?

I think this is a parable that is very applicable to our times and our culture. We forget that we are part of Creation and thus connected to all of Creation and our Creator. Life and everything we have is a gift. When we forget that, our wants and possessions take possession of us and displace God. As in the parable told by Jesus, the miracle of God's abundance remains to be managed. How are we doing? The parable's

metaphor for the kingdom is not just the abundant harvest, but the good life it is intended to produce for the community.

This past week I saw a lady coming out of Costco with a huge smile on her face. The only thing bigger than her smile was the mango cheesecake that was balanced on top of her teeming cart! And that is fine. There is nothing wrong with enjoying life. But as Warren Buffet noted, there is something amiss when his umpteen millions of dollars of annual income is taxed at 15% and his receptionist's salary is taxed at 35%. There is something amiss when the rent on a temporary classroom at KamIII School had to be paid by a gift from the Ritz Carlton in Kapalua, otherwise the kids would have to return to going to school in a tent like they did when I first got here. There is something amiss when the public safety is ignored and bridges collapse, steam pipes explode, etc.

In these times of confusion and instant media trying to tell us who we are and where we should be going, I think like Jesus and the author of Ecclesiastes, we have to again take our Scriptures seriously. We have to drill down into to them and mine their Wisdom tradition to tell the story of our constant need for and reliance upon a loving and generous God in the modern idiom. We have to use them not to uphold the ideology of the day, but to listen to them for the Wisdom of God spoken through 4000 years. Then we have to be able to live and preach it to our world and our kids.

Amen