

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

October 5, 2008

Proper 22A 2008

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

Well, it has been quite a week, hasn't it? I left last Sunday after church for clergy retreat at Camp Mokole'ia on Oahu's North Shore. Even in that wild and pristine spot, news reached me of the crisis in our financial institutions and the roller coaster ride the stock markets were taking. News came later of another 160,000 jobs lost last month in the national economy and the drop in the number of visitors to Hawai'i. Then came the debate of the vice-presidential candidates. Since both candidates have sons being deployed to Iraq, I was again reminded that our nation has been at war now for longer than it was engaged in WWII.

Just as my anxiety meter was about to spin off the wall, the lectionary put before me two great teachings from the Bible: the giving to Moses of the Ten Commandments and Jesus' last teachings in the Temple. If that wasn't enough (and I needed all the encouragement I could get), the church calendar put before me the example of Saint Francis of Assisi. What I found comforting was not just the wisdom in these lessons but the fact that all three lessons arose out of times of profound change and uncertainty.

The Israelites in the Sinai desert over 3000 years ago didn't know who they were as a people let alone where they were going. In that lonely and desolate place they learned that the Creator was ever living and ever creating and his nature and reality was beyond their imagination. To create and accept a lesser God of their own liking (ie made in their own image as an idol) was to risk destruction. They learned that the Creator is in charge and that God cares for God's creation. (That is a brief synopsis of the first 4 commandments). Finally, they learned that for humans this requires an ethical response: we must respect every human being and deal justly and honestly with one another. (That is a brief summary of the last 6 commandments).

The Temple Jesus visited two thousand years ago was far different from the one God had Solomon build. Rather than being the center of justice and compassion for the society, it had become corrupt. The high priests lobbied the Roman Emperor and purchased their positions with bribes. They turned the Temple treasury into a bank that charged usurious interest. Not surprisingly, they lived well while the people suffered. Jesus' parable of the Vineyard owner and the unjust and unworthy tenants addresses that reality the people faced.

A lot of people preach on this parable as being about how the Christian church would replace the Temple. I think that puts ourselves too much into the picture and diminishes the lesson. I think Jesus was warning the Temple authorities that by diminishing God and subverting their basic ethical responsibilities they risked destruction and replacement by worthier stewards of God's goodness. (Remember, this parable follows the one about the evil tenants who would not produce the fruits of the harvest).

Almost a thousand years ago in Europe, things probably weren't much better than what our worst fears are today. The economy and society were changing – the people were leaving the serfdom of the fields for towns; trade and a monetary economy were developing. Wealth, other than land, was being created and becoming increasingly concentrated in fewer hands. Both government and the church were unable to respond to these new realities because of corruption or incompetence.

The response came from a most unlikely source – a privileged young man from Assisi, Italy – the son of a well-off cloth merchant - who had led a somewhat confusing and misspent youth. His name was Francis. He rejected what everyone considered normal and embraced poverty and went to live in the forest. Not many of Francis' words survive – just the Canticle of the Sun – but that's OK. Francis is credited with once having said, "Preach the Gospel always, and if absolutely necessary, use words." Francis lived the Gospel. He didn't stay in a monastery, but like Jesus he brought the good news into the world where the people were. Francis lived the Gospel caring for those who went unnoticed and uncared for.

Yes, Francis loved animals and we celebrate his example by blessing the animals entrusted to our care. Francis saw the love and care of the Creator in all Creation. Tradition has it that the animals responded. I believe it. Don't we all respond when someone sees the goodness in us? So let's be careful. Let's not put so much emphasis on the animals that we forget the love – it is in each and every one of us also.

In troubling times both Jesus in the Temple and Francis in the woods remind me of the words of the prophet Micah:

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
And what does the LORD require of you
But to do justice, and to love kindness
And to walk humbly with your God.”

That advise will always get us through the toughest of times.

AMEN