

Proper 14
Cycle C

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Isaiah of Jerusalem was an unofficial court prophet from “the year that King Uzziah died” (6:1; 742 BCE) until after Sennacherib’s unsuccessful siege of Jerusalem (701 BCE). The setting of his call to prophetic ministry (6:1-13) suggests that he may also have been a priest. If he was a priest, then to put this condemnation of the Temple’s worship on his lips underscores the degree to which Judah has become estranged from its Lord. Although God ordinarily enjoys the smell of the sacrifices and the sound of his people in solemn assembly, Jerusalem’s wickedness, which approaches the legendary wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah, makes all worship in the Temple repugnant to God.

Psalms 50:1-8, 23-24

Psalms such as Psalm 50 ascribed to Asaph (2 Kings 18, 37, 1 Chronicles 15:19, etc.) are usually related to the sacrificial cultus and its priesthood. (The BCP does not print the ascriptions, so one must look at a modern Bible to see them.) This particular psalm contains a liturgy of prophetic reproof and judgment that does not fit easily into the standard typologies; but its liturgical divisions are clear: verses 1-6, a call to judgment; 7-13, an address to God’s people; 14-15, exhortation; 16-21, an address to the wicked; 22-23, summary exhortation. The categories of wrongdoers are those who do not pay their vows to make public thanksgiving after making public lament (50:14), those who do not call upon the Lord in times of trouble (50:15), and those who attend the public worship of God while ignoring God’s “discipline” (*musar*, 50:17). The psalm reminds the worshipers of a peculiar belief of the Hebrews that their God does not actually eat the flesh of the sacrifices and, therefore, does not need them (50:12-13). This difference from the cults of the nations is the basis for the much later story of Bel and the Dragon in the Greek version of the Book of Daniel.

OR

Genesis 15:1-6

It is difficult to understand why Eliezer, a servant in Abram’s house, should inherit his master’s goods in verse 2; and in any case, the reference to Damascus is virtually incomprehensible in context, leading some scholars to believe that the entire phrase is a textual corruption. Since verse 3 gives yet another reply to the Lord’s words in verse 1, some interpreters believe verse 2 comes from one narrative source and verse 3 from another. However one judges the matter of sources, the passage makes it very clear that Abram’s lack of a male heir is a difficulty that brings into question the validity of God’s promises to the patriarch. Verse 6 contains the organizing principle: Abram’s trust in God allowed God to fulfill the promise despite the great age of Abram and Sarai.

Psalms 33:12-22

The *hymns* were sung in the Jerusalem temple as part of the worship of God. Most hymns celebrate God as creator and ruler of the earth as does the first part of this hymn (1-11). The second part of the hymn (12-22) celebrates God’s power as superior to that of any ruler, even the rulers of the great nations surrounding tiny Judah. Judah’s defense against the wiles of its enemies is “fear of Yahweh,” *i. e.* doing the commandments, which entitles the nation to hope in God’s deliverance from the nations round about. Trust in God’s “faithfulness” (*xesed*, vs. 18, 20, often mistranslated “loving kindness”) and in God’s public reputation (*shem*, “name,” vs. 21) bring salvation from enemies, both human and natural.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

In Hebrews faith is the quality of faithful perseverance, a trait which the readers of the epistle seem to lack and which may cost them their inheritance with Christ. In this chapter the author attempts to inspire his readers with examples of faith from scripture and sometimes appears to take some liberty with the actual wording of scripture. For example, although Genesis never identifies Abel's relationship to God as one of faith (Genesis 4:2-5), our author declares that the acceptability of his sacrifice came from his faith (Hebrews 11:4). Similarly, Genesis does not base the relationship of Enoch and Noah on faith, but our author is certain faith was what led to Enoch's bodily departure from earth (11:5) and Noah's salvation (11:6-7). This praise of past heroes of faith has affinities with Sirach 44:1-50:21, which is much longer than the one in Hebrews and extols the heroes for various virtues, not just faithfulness.

Luke 12:32-40

Jesus' parables in the Gospels are always about the coming kingdom of God. In this case the issue is what it is like to live in the time just before the arrival of God's kingdom on earth. "Dressed for action" (12:35, NRSV) should read, "Have your loins girded." The image is of an impending battle or, perhaps, to the preparations for escape from Egypt in Exodus 12:11. Urgency and watchfulness are the attributes of those who know the kingdom is near. The saying about laying up treasure in heaven (12:33-34) comes from Q, the collection of sayings used by the authors of Matthew and Luke. The parallel saying is in Matthew 6:19-21. The saying about the thief in verses 39 has its parallel in Matthew 24:42-51. The advice to sell one's possessions and give to the poor in 12:33 is a characteristic theme of Luke's, but the wording may have been suggested by the story in Luke 18:18-25, especially 18:22.

© Fred L. Horton. All rights reserved.