

Sunday 6

Do you remember in grammar school when you were told to write a paragraph? “How are we going to do that?” we asked. Then the teacher told us to do so by comparing and contrasting things. And that really helped. We could do that.

There must have been teachers in the ancient world who gave this same advice to their students, for when we look at today’s readings we see that all three authors, Jeremiah, the psalmist, and Luke, are using this method. In the first reading Jeremiah makes a contrast between those who trust in the Lord and those who trust in themselves. Those who trust in God are like a tree planted near water which can therefore bear fruit all the time (we are in a warm climate), but those who trust in themselves are like a bush in the desert. The psalmist uses the same imagery of a tree planted near water when describing good people, that is, those who trust in God, but he uses a different image for those who trust in themselves. Instead of comparing them to a bush in the desert he says they are like chaff which the wind drives away.

Luke’s contrast is between those who are successful in the ordinary sense of the word, that is, those who are wealthy, well-fed,

esteemed and happy, and those who are poor, hungry, hated and unhappy. He also brings in a time-contrast, for he distinguishes between the present and the future and says that in the future there will be a reversal of the present situation: those who are now suffering will then be happy and those who are now successful will then suffer. That future which Luke here envisions is the life of the risen, for he, like Paul in our second reading today, presumes that there is resurrection from the dead.

The simplest interpretation of this Gospel which we often give ourselves goes something like this. We presume that Luke is saying that in our present world it is often the evil people, those willing to cut corners, those willing to abandon morality on the altar of success, who succeed, but that in the future world of the risen they will get their come-uppance, whereas the good people who did not cut corners and therefore often brought up the rear in the race for success here on earth, will find themselves rewarded in the future world of the risen.

No one can deny that this interpretation may be correct, for on the basis of our experience we can bear witness to the truth of its first claim that good people in our world often suffer. As to its second claim that there will be a reversal of this situation in a future life,

no answer is possible because no one has returned from the next world to tell us it is so. We hope and believe that it is so, but we have no proof. Nevertheless, there are two things we can add to this interpretation. The first is that good people may die poor and suffering, but they also die in great peace and even satisfaction with the life they led, because they know they tried to do the right thing. They did God's will in trust that God would take care of them both here and hereafter, and now at the end of their lives they believe that God did exactly that. So we have that old phrase: Virtue is its own reward. But those who were selfish and greedy often die in regret, sometimes in regret for the evil they did, but always in regret that they have to leave all that they have.

The second is that this Gospel could be wrongly interpreted to mean that since those who are now hungry and hated and sinned against will get their reward in the next life, there is no reason for them or for anyone else to attempt to change their present situation for the better. Indeed, someone could even argue that they ought to remain as they are in order to be sure to be rewarded later on. No one, we might say to ourselves, would accept such a perverse interpretation of this passage. But is that true? Could it be that what we will not accept intellectually we do accept in practice?

Must we not admit that sometimes we are so overwhelmed by the suffering and injustice of our world that we give up and take refuge in the belief that what we cannot do here and now God will do in the next life? We leave it to God and the future life to undo the injustices of our lives here.

We should be careful not to give up too easily because if we do we are indeed buying into this perverse interpretation of this Gospel. Our hands and hearts should instead be concentrated on attempting to anticipate God's future judgment, God's justice, by creating a better society, one in which children are not abused, one in which the rich and clever are not allowed to rob the poor, one in which there is education and health care for all citizens, and so on. If we do not attempt to create a better society, then we are, despite our cries to the contrary, buying into a perverse interpretation of today's Gospel.

Let us ask the Lord to help us not to do that. At the same time let us ask for the grace to live good lives and to accept whatever suffering may come our way as a consequence of this effort, and to trust that God will support us in this life and reward us in the next.