

Vespers Homily

The Fourth Sunday of Pentecost

June 21, 2015

Psalm 45:11-18
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

For reasons known only to themselves, the editors of the Lectionary have chosen to omit verses 21 to 24 in this reading from Matthew 11. Here they are:

“Woe to you Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you it will be more tolerable on the Day of Judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

“And you Capernaum, will you be exalted in heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it shall be more tolerable on the Day of Judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”

Now let’s go back and read the poetry of verse 17: “We piped to you and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn.”

Who were the ones who did not dance or mourn? It was the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum and many, many more, who heard John’s call to repentance and did not repent and who heard Jesus’ proclamation of God’s love and forgiveness, shrugged,

and went on their way. They were the "children in the marketplace" who simply would not respond. It was all irrelevant in their lives. They were absorbed in the simple process of making their way in this world, perhaps paying lip-service to God on the special feast days once or twice a year.

Of course, we have no one like that today.

How can a vibrant religion such as that of the Jews have become so marginalized, so irrelevant to so many Jews? Perhaps it was fatigue; perhaps it was generations of disappointment waiting for the God-promised Messiah that would usher in the golden age; and perhaps it was a creeping cynicism that said religion just might not be the way to truth and beauty and happiness.

Then again, perhaps it was confusion as to whom to believe. Jesus and John were not the only prophets in Israel. There was a host of prophets, all of whom claimed to be speaking for God; none of whom agreed on exactly what God was saying. They all had some sort of following; Jesus encountered them.

The real problem was not with competing prophets. The problem that John and Jesus attacked was that the official religion of the day came to the people through the filter of its interpretation by Scribes and Pharisees. They were the ones who read from the giant scrolls of Torah in the synagogues; they were the ones who then told the people what they had heard, what to think. They had enormous control over the lives of the people of Israel because secular and religious life were inextricably entwined.

It all might have worked had those authorized to read and interpret been selfless servants of God. Rather, they had become a privileged elite. They had a vested interest in remaining a privileged elite.

The "wise and understanding" Pharisees condemned both Jesus and John. Why? Because their actions were dangerously emotional; they

were not officially sanctioned. They were not licensed to preach. They were out of control.

The Pharisees' minds were closed; perhaps it was right to say that God has "hidden these things" from the wise and understanding" and revealed them to those with open minds, people for whom micro-managed religion that is pervasive of culture is a burden.

The interpretation of the Law, with its myriad rules, imposed on Israel by the Pharisees, is the heavy yoke on the necks of the people. It had nothing to do with taxes; that was the yoke imposed by Rome. It had to do with proper behavior and strict observance of the myriad laws that had been constructed through the Pharisaic interpretation of Torah.

Failure to observe those laws would mean public disgrace, censure, ostracism, and even death by stoning, organized by the wise and understanding. It was a punishment-based culture into which, interestingly enough, John's call to repentance fit quite well. John has been called, correctly I think, the last prophet of the Old Testament.

Jesus proclaims the New Testament, a different understanding of the people's relationship to God. It's not new: it's a very old understanding, a very old idea of what God expects of His people. It's the original understanding that has been submerged in laws and rules. It's an understanding that was a covenant, not a contract.

God had said, "I will be your God; you shall be my people." It's an unconditional relationship that does not depend on the behavior of Israel to be true. What did – what does – God ask of Israel? What does He ask of us?

Jesus peels away centuries of interpretation to return to the one basic ancient expectation placed by God on Israel. This is what God asks:

“You shall love The Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself”— just two commandments, not so difficult or demanding.

This morning at the 10 o'clock service I recognized that our own Molly Stevenson was one of five deputies from the Diocese of Georgia to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church being held in Salt Lake City. I would make an observation that is perhaps germane. The convention is ten days of about a thousand people voting on policies and rules for the Episcopal Church. At their very best those rules and policies for the Episcopal Church are an expression of the teachings of Our Lord, Jesus Christ.

In His every word and act, loving God and loving our neighbors is the yoke that Jesus carries for the people of Israel. He carries it for you and me now, and He invites us to share it. His yoke is easy; our burden is light.

In His Holy Name.