

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 14, 2010

Jeremiah 17:5-8

Those who trust

Psalms 1:1-2, 3, 4 and 6

The Just One

1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20

First-fruits of the Living

Luke 6:17, 20-26

Luke's Beatitudes

<http://www.usccb.org/nab/021410.shtml>

There is much to be said about Paul's remarks on Resurrection. And Luke's account of the Beatitudes (with Woes attached) is striking in its directness and cutting edge.

But lately I've been looking at the texts in our liturgies that do not get much recognition due to the more prominent readings they share a Sunday space with. My thinking is that as we grow in appreciation of these less prominent readings, we will appreciate the more popular items even more, since they are chosen to fit together.

What draws my attention this week is the reading from Jeremiah along with the Response Psalm. They are very similar, and no doubt that is the reason they grace the same Liturgy of the Word. Not only do they share the same theme, but even their very structures mirror each another.

Both are psalms. In fact, today's Response Psalm serves as the introduction for the entire Psalter, the book of psalms. It celebrates "the Just One," a recurrent figure in Wisdom literature, often contrasted with "the Wicked." In this case, it represents the ideal Israelite, the faithful one who is imagined as the model reader of the psalms.

This short psalm begins by extolling the Just One, described as not mixing with scoffers and the wicked, but who instead studies God's law day and night. Having put that general statement of praise on record, the psalm proceeds to elaborate it, but now in terms of the famous image of a tree planted by running water. Much of the Mideast is arid land, and the green foliage of an oasis can be spotted a long way off. It is the unmistakable sign of water. In the psalm, the green tree yields its fruit in due season and its leaves never wither.

But the psalm then proceeds to describe the other side of the picture. Not so the wicked, it says. They are like chaff, blown this way and that. The inconstancy of windblown chaff offers a vivid contrast to the rooted tree.

Jeremiah's text is so similar that it seems almost a variant of the same psalm. But it does differ. Again contrasting images dominate the poem, now stated in terms of curse and blessing, consequences of two courses of behavior. No longer are we talking about the just and the wicked. Now we are talking about faith and false faith. The cursed are those who wrongly place their trust in fallible human beings and earthly enterprises. Blessing, on the other hand, comes to those who place their trust in God, in whom alone is our security.

While Jeremiah's poem also employs the imagery of the tree, like Psalm 1, it does so in a more consistent way. Rather than compare tree and chaff, it sticks with the tree image, withered or living. In this poem the negative image comes first. The wretched one is—

“... like a barren bush in the desert
that enjoys no change of season,
but stands in a lava waste,
a salt and empty earth.”

There is some vivid language here. The “salt and empty earth” is an effective, memorable phrase. After that we turn to the blessed one, who is—

“... like a tree planted beside the waters
that stretches out its roots to the stream:
It fears not the heat when it comes;
its leaves stay green;
in the year of drought it shows no distress,
but still bears fruit.”

The Gospels pick up this language. “By their fruits you will know them.” And toward the conclusion of his story, in an action parable enacted in the context of the Temple cleansing, he “curses” a fig tree, soon to become barren.

For reflection: When Jesus says, “By their fruits you will know them,” what might he mean?