

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 43.16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3.4b-14

John 12.1-8

Isaiah 43.16-21

- 1) This lesson is from “Deutero-Isaiah” (Second Isaiah), which comprises chs. 40-55 of the book bearing the prophet’s name.
 - a) Deutero-Isaiah was written during the Babylonian Exile (6th-5th C., B.C.)
 - i) This lesson is from the section known to scholars as the “Book of Comfort”.
 - (1) Chs. 41 to 47 set forth a systematized theology of creative redemption.
- 2) The lesson for today speaks of a new exodus. The LORD is at work, redeeming His people.
 - a) The opening passage is a series of participles which answer the implied question, “Who is the LORD?”
 - i) The LORD is the One who redeems, who has made His people that they might “declare [His] praise.”

Psalm 126

- 1) This is a communal lament, recalling God’s past intervention on behalf of His people.
 - a) The people pray that this past intervention may serve as a motivation for God help in the present.
 - i) This prayer is a parallel to the LORD’s recollection of His past deeds recited in the lesson from Isaiah.
- 2) “Then were we like those who dream” (v.1): The verb root here may also be translated as “those who are healed”.
- 3) Vv. 6 and 7 may represent a parallel proverb, using agricultural imagery to illustrate reversal of fortune.

Philippians 3.4b-14

- 1) Paul uses the idea of “knowing” Jesus (v. 8) in the sense of experience and deep personal involvement, as the word is used in the Old Testament.
 - a) This knowledge transforms the subject into the likeness of that which is known (2 Cor. 3.18).
 - b) For this knowledge, Paul has suffered the loss of all, and regards all that has been lost as “rubbish”. The Greek word used here, *skybala*, is rather stronger than rubbish, being in meaning more close to “excrement”.
- 2) Paul’s discourse at this point needs to be put in context. The letter here makes an abrupt change in tone, leading up to a warning against false preachers (a warning not included in this lesson).
 - a) Those whom Paul is concerned about seem to have been itinerant Christian preachers who, in the name of “perfection” (*cf.* vv. 12-16), seek to impose on Gentile converts a legalistic form of Judaism which has been superceded by God’s act in Christ.

- i) The idea of a higher “perfection” also speaks of an early form of Gnosticism.
 - b) Paul therefore points out that *if* the standard is compliance with the Law, he has met that standard, but nonetheless preaches that that is *not* the standard.
 - c) Paul recounts his own history to make clear how “perfection” in a legalistic sense has been totally and irreversibly replaced in and by Christ.
- 3) “Righteousness” relates to the worthiness to stand before God, blameless. Paul makes clear that this does not come from the Law, but through faith in Jesus’ atonement.
- a) “[K]nowing” Christ (v. 8) goes far beyond intellectual knowledge to include, in the O.T. sense, deep personal experience and involvement.
 - b) “... that I may gain Christ and be found in him ...” (v.9): Paul hopes to appear before God as one identified with Jesus.
 - c) Salvation comes not by the Law, but through faith, through accepting God’s offer of renewed and right relationship with Him made freely and graciously through Jesus Christ.
- 4) Paul continues that he seeks to “be found in [Christ]”. Paul hopes to appear before God at judgment as one identified totally with Christ.
- a) He continues (at v. 9), “not having a righteousness of my own”: This begins a very focused summary of the Pauline doctrine of justification set forth in detail in Romans and Galatians.
 - i) The Law is holy, but cannot remedy sin.
 - (1) Therefore, it is a flawed way to righteousness.
 - (a) The way of life is the Way, Jesus!
 - (i) All righteousness is imparted from God, through Christ.
- 5) “[S]haring of his sufferings”: It is precisely in the weakness of suffering that one experiences the power that is working resurrection (*i.e.*, the Spirit of God in Christ).
- a) The path to resurrection lies through death.
 - i) The call of Jesus is the call to the Cross.
 - (1) The path to salvation involves not looking back, but looking forward only, focused on Christ.

John 12.1-8

- 1) The verses included in this lesson must be understood in the context of what has come immediately before, and what will follow, in John’s account.
- a) In ch. 11, Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead. this is the culmination of His “signs,” which point to who He is, as accompanied (each) by an I AM saying (by which He identifies Himself using the Holy Name of the LORD).
 - i) Jesus identifies Himself as I AM at 11.25.
 - ii) Caiaphas’ statement that it is “expedient ... that one should die for the people” (11.49) is a grim mirror image of what Jesus will actually accomplish in His death.
 - (1) This “mirroring” is seen further at 12.19 (that “the world has gone after him”) and 12.20-26 (that Gentiles wish to see Jesus).
 - (a) As He gives life, He receives a sentence of death.
 - b) Jesus is anointed by Mary (today’s lesson) in the context of His being prepared for His death, His atoning sacrifice.

- c) Throughout the Gospel Jesus has declared that His “hour is not at hand”. Now, in ch. 12, He declares that His hour is come. He is to be lifted up (12.27-36). His hour is when God’s glory is revealed, in the crucifixion.
 - i) Unlike in the synoptic gospels Jesus does not pray that this “cup” might pass from Him, but states that it is for this purpose (sacrifice) that He has come to this hours (12.27).
- 2) The verses in today’s lesson serve, therefore, as a transition between the “Book of Signs” and the “Book of Glory” (in which the overriding narrative of the “Book of Glory” (12.37-20.31) is that Jesus gives power to His disciples that they may become children of God).
 - a) Jesus is anointed for the “hour” which is now come.
- 3) In John the saying about the poor is the climax of the story of Jesus’ anointing, whereas in the Synoptic Gospels the incident is closed with Jesus commenting on what the woman has done.
 - a) The saying about the poor is a paraphrase of Deut. 15.11, which is found in the context of descriptions of ideal relations under the Law.