

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Aug 3rd 2013

Of the many gifts we Christians have received from the Jews, one of the most remarkable is the sense of stewardship and sharing expressed in today's passage from Leviticus. The Jews had trouble living up to its standards, just as we would (and do), but they preserved it as a goal in the Torah, not watering it down, not making it "realistic". There are hundreds of regulations set forth in Leviticus, and not all are transportable across the centuries and the many differences in culture. Some commentators would argue that that caution applies to this one, as well. But there is a strong reason to believe it does apply today, just as it did 3000 years ago. The fact that the Church gives it to us as our first reading certainly points in that direction.

Here's the context. At Israel's beginning as a nation every family had an equal share of the available land and resources. Over time, things happened – bad luck, bad judgement, greed. As a result some families lost some or all of what they had, while others acquired it. Wealth, power, resources become concentrated in the hands of a few. Here Israel's God commands that every 50 years what had been lost (and gained) should be redistributed.

But that's not fair! I worked for what I have – worked hard! What's the point of trying in the first place, if what I gain is going to be given to someone else – someone who's perhaps less industrious, perhaps even undeserving? Why indeed . . . The answer, very simply, is "because they need it". And, at a deeper level, "because that's how God has designed the world to run." That's been hard to accept from the very beginning. Chapter 15 in Luke is Jesus' refutation of the "that's not fair!" reaction, and its extended treatment in Luke, particularly, is clear evidence that early Christians had the same trouble we do. Uneven distribution over time is inevitable. Redistribution is an option. It's up to us.

The facts are that everything we have is gift – pure gift – all of it. My life, my talents, my heritage, my education, my ambition, my health, my opportunity – all gift. Personal property and private ownership are at the heart of our Western value system and our priorities. But they are not central to the Judeo-Christian world view. That's partly what Jesus was getting at when he called his fellow Jews to "repent". It was not so much that they should be contrite (though that is often in order), but that they should change their priorities to put them in line with God's priorities.

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that he could find no basis in natural law for private ownership, but he supported it because he noted that things held privately are better managed than things held collectively, thereby justifying ownership pragmatically. St. Thomas was certainly correct in his analysis, and the point he made has been made by many others, before and since. So how can we reconcile St. Thomas and Leviticus? I think this way. My hard work and good fortune increase the size of the pie. For that reason private ownership makes good sense, as it ensures that more pie is available.

However, private ownership has to be interpreted not as absolute, but as conditional. Jesus' parable of the servants given stewardship over varying assets (e.g., Matt 25) comes into the picture here. As does the story of Jesus and the rich young man, who was counseled to give what he had to the poor (Mk 17:21). Jesus puts that counsel right up with the other seven commandments governing inter-individual relationships.

We tend to interpret giving what we have to the poor as charity, which it is, if we translate "charity" as love. But it is more than generosity. It is how the reign of God operates. I am expected to give of my surplus, to give without condescension, smugness, or arrogance, to give only with concern for the person whose want my productivity (or good fortune) can alleviate. Correspondingly, the recipient of what I give has a responsibility as well – to accept without bitterness or envy. Forget worthiness or being deserving. Think, instead, of the prodigal son, who said, himself, that he was unworthy.

Think for a moment about something you may yourself have said, or something you may have heard your friends or acquaintances say when they "explain" a certain indulgence. "We owed it to ourselves" or "We deserved a new . . ." Oh? Is that how God wants us to use our surplus? Maybe it is, sometimes. But sometimes, maybe not. Leviticus challenges us to rethink our comfortable assumptions about what is "mine" and what I do with it.

Today's first reading is not just an interesting vignette from a time long past. It is a timeless, perpetually relevant statement about how God wants us to use the gifts God has given us. In a sense, I am God's agent. If those gifts stop with me, if they're shunted off to serve my gratification, then I have betrayed my Master.

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