

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Sep 6th 2013

The scribes and Pharisees question the fact that the disciples of Jesus act differently than those of John the Baptist, but Jesus indicates that the question is not what their correct manner of life should be but rather how they are responding to God. This is rather reminiscent of what Paul says about the diversity of gifts and offices in I Corinthians 12 or even what Ecclesiastes has to say in chapter 3 about a time for giving birth and a time for dying, a time for planting and a time for uprooting what has been planted.

In and of itself this question of the difference in the practice of the two groups of disciples is not of primary importance to us today, but what Jesus goes on to say about new wineskins in this perspective is. The comment about needing new wineskins for new wine seems to be a justification not only for the way his disciples act but also for the fact that he himself is something new in the world and he implies that this latter fact in itself calls for new religious practices.

So far, so good. Those last two sentences of the gospel, though, are striking in how they seem to go off in an entirely new direction, almost contradicting what had gone before: if the old wine is better, why do we bother with new wine? Why not stay with the tried and true, the Law, the Temple, and the current religious structures? Apparently because such wineskins have served their purpose and have weakened with age; the older wine that they carried has been popular and is reaching an end as well....

Does this mean anything for us? We live in an age of change like the world has never before seen, and we are more accustomed to changing, growing, and leaving good things behind. We might have a certain nostalgia for the safety and dependability those good things offered, but we press on in many areas nonetheless.

We have to ask how our religious practice, our standards, our entire lives --- but certainly not our faith and who we believe in --- call for new wineskins and what they must look like.

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