

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Aug 18th 2015

These are not easy readings to reflect upon. First we have the angel of the Lord calling Gideon to commit a version of herem or holy war, namely “cutting down Midian to the last man.” Even though I recognize the historical ambiguities and scriptural hyperboles at work here, as a scholar of the Rwanda genocide I can’t help but recoil at such texts. And then we have Jesus expressing grave doubts about the place of the wealthy in the coming Kingdom of God. This is not an easy message for me as an American Christian, no matter how “middle class” I might claim to be. Compared to most of the communities I’ve encountered in Africa, I am most definitely rich. If nothing else, these readings remind me that the biblical witness is not just therapeutic; there are many texts that can (and should) make us uncomfortable.

I must say, though, that I find Gideon’s honesty to be refreshing. In the face of the angel’s flattery, his response is nothing if not blunt. “If the Lord is with us, why has all of this happened to us?” In the face of the manifold sufferings in our lives and in our world, have we not also shared Gideon’s doubts about God’s abiding presence? If Gideon teaches me nothing else in this reading, it is to be bold enough to voice these doubts in prayer.

I am also reminded that we do not see as God sees, and God’s vision often reverses our expectations. God chooses Gideon even though his family is the “lowliest in Mannaseh,” and he in turn is “the most insignificant in my father’s house.” In the new age inaugurated by Jesus Christ, the rich young man who would normally be seen as “blessed” is no longer at the head of the banquet table. Rather, “the last shall be first,” and a ragtag band of disciples will stand at the head of Israel.

We also see God’s salvific will at work. God redeems Israel from the Midianite destruction of their land and livestock, raising up Gideon as an unlikely “champion.” Jesus reminds his disciples that their salvation does not depend on their works or their wealth but rather with God’s unmerited, unearned, unpurchased, almost unimaginable grace. So for all of the ambiguities of these texts, one should take note of the closing words of Yahweh-Shalom, the one who speaks of peace to his people. “Be calm. Do not fear. You shall not die.”

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