

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Oct 13th 2015

In the aftermath of the publication of Pope Francis' encyclical, "On Care for our Common Home" and, more recently, his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations, today's readings ring in our ears with special pertinence. Like Francis' letter, the passages from Paul and Luke speak powerfully about God's creation and our place as creatures.

To the Christian community living in the capital city of the Roman Empire, where citizens gather in civic liturgies worshipping the late emperor as "Lord," "Savior," and "Father," Paul reminds his addressees that he and they worship another Father and Lord--God the Father and his Son, the Lord Jesus. He also reminds them that the divinity and power of God the creator has always been visible in "what he has made"—all of creation. But the power holders of the Empire have chosen rather to worship idols of human fabrication.

In the passage from chapter 11 of Luke, Jesus, in the middle of a dinner party hosted by a Pharisee, confronts the Pharisees with their failure to recognize their own creaturehood. When they fuss about his failure to observe the prescribed washing before the meal, he says, "Oh you Pharisees! Although you clean the outside of the cup and the dish, inside you are filled with plunder and evil. You fools! Did not the maker of the outside also make the inside also make the inside? But as to what is within, give alms, and behold, everything will be clean for you."

The logic of Jesus' response may not be obvious at first. What is the connection between their preoccupation with hygienic purity (washing before eating) and God's creation of "what is inside"? The point seems to be that their preoccupation with the purity of physical surfaces (i.e., plates) overlooks what is even more important in the eyes of their Creator, the purity of their hearts. They are greedy. And the best way to address that is to let go of their possessiveness by giving to the poor. Jesus had made exactly the same move when the issue of purity came up another time, when he said to a similar audience, "Nothing that enters one from the outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile" (Mark 7:15). When the disciples asked for a clarification, he said, "Do you not realize that everything that goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters not the heart but the stomach and passes out into the latrine? . . . But what comes out of a person--that is what defiles. From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile" (Mark 7:18-23).

The connection between Jesus' teaching that proper understanding relates to understanding the Creator is already apparent in the prophet Isaiah. When Isaiah of Jerusalem confronts the wealthy elite with his parable about the unproductive vineyard, he diagnoses their main flaw as ignoring the works of the Creator:

Woe to those who demand strong drink

as soon as they rise in the morning,

And linger into the night

while wine inflames them! . . .

But what the Lord does, they regard not,

the work of his hands they see not. (Isa 5:11-12)

So when Jesus confronts the Pharisees during that dinner party, he recommends that they give alms as an antidote to their greed, for that is precisely the “impurity” of heart that prevents them from seeing that they are creatures of God and are ignoring the needs of the poor, their fellow creatures.

This is exactly what Pope Francis means when he challenges us to practice “integral ecology” by recognizing that the deepest pollution in our world is our failure to perceive the excluded and discarded among us are fellow creatures and members of the one human family.

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