

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Dec 3rd 2017

Happy New Year! Here we are, eleven months into the calendar year, five months into the fiscal year, about twelve weeks into the academic year — and our church has chosen this Sunday, about four weeks before our actual New Year, to be the start of our liturgical year. Would it have been a better idea to begin the church year with the calendar year? I think not. It is really a great idea that our liturgical year transcends and invades all those other cycles. That interruption reminds us — sharply — that the Christian community lives out time in a wholly different framework. Just as we have taught the whole world to mark all planetary history with Christ at the center, and all other time before and after him; and, so we insist on placing our “church year” slightly out of sync with the secular calendar year. The birth of Jesus Messiah centers our sense of time. Further, we begin the church year by focusing on our need for God, which God began to be address in a whole new way with the Incarnation. Today’s Scripture readings help us contemplate our need for God.

The first reading from the scroll of Isaiah was written by the one we have learned to call Third Isaiah, because he writes in what appears to be a third sage in the scroll, the time after the return of the Judeans from the Babylonian Exile but before they rebuilt the temple. The reading is a lament. The times were lamentable. Having been liberated from one empire, they are now laboring under the power of yet another empire, the Persians. Homecoming is not turning out to be all they had been hoping for. They feel their need for knowing the power of God in their collective life more than ever. Like a child calling for a parent, they address God, once again, as Father. They cry out, in effect, “Tear open the sky! Come and help us. Even our so-called ‘good deeds’ are not really what we intend. We are like clay trying to shape itself into a vessel. No. You are the potter. Come and shape us into what you want us to become. Father, we still need your help.”

The Gospel writer, Mark, when he begins narrating the public life of Jesus, writes that “the heavens were being torn open.” He was not giving a weather report. He was alluding to Isaiah’s lament and implying that the coming of Jesus, accompanied by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, some five centuries after Isaiah’s writing, is the surprising response to that ancient prayer.

When we now read Isaiah in our day, we recognize that we have been baptized into his body in the power of that same spirit, but we also know that we are unfinished work. The clay threatens to harden prematurely, and we need help to become more responsive to the potter’s work, the Father’s ongoing shaping of our lives.

Later in his Gospel — today’s reading — Mark, in his rendition of Jesus’ speech on Mount Olivet, chooses to end it with that perfect little parable about the ultimate time frame of our lives. We do find ourselves like servants left behind to carry out tasks while the Master of the household is apparently absent. The message is that we are not expected simply to do a job, but to do it mindfully — awake, and alert to the reality that the power to do anything comes from the Master himself. This time of year in the northern hemisphere, when much around us is dying or dead and we feel cold and hungry, and our laboring is often clumsy — this is a good time to pray the prayer of the psalmist: Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

