

Jazz Whispers – Proper 14C

Can it be that Our Father art unaware of the unlikelihood, not to say near-impossibility of our doing what he says? Doubtful. Can it be that God is aware of the unlikelihood and is morbidly establishing for us an impossible paradigm? My sources say no. Then it must be that God is being literary rather than literal through the scriptures, and just wants us to think, feel and be transformed through their study.

Today's readings are especially evocative of our inner selves. They aren't linear, nor prescriptive, so much as expressionistic and provocative. The great text we call Isaiah, a compilation of the words of a number of prophets, commences with this operatic – not to say histrionic – denunciation of all that has been taking place in worship among the people. "There is blood on your hands!," cries the voice of God. But it is their behavior outside the realm of worship that is really at issue, because they aren't living out the values they profess.

If we listen closely to the psalmist, we get a clue about this. In Psalm 50 we have a syncopated popular song, that reiterates the issue before us;

The mighty one speaks; beauty shines forth.

Before him is a fire; a tempest all around.

Hear, O people when I testify; I am God.

I know all the birds; all that moves is mine.

Offer to God thanksgiving, call on me in trouble.

But you who hate discipline, and cast my words away.

Your mouth is given to evil; your tongue frames deceit.

I have been silent; you thought I approved.

For you who forget God; there will be no one to deliver.

But to those who bring thanksgiving; I will show salvation.

It is not for your sacrifices that I rebuke you. Your offerings are continually before me, but they are not what is important to me, and they are giving you a false sense of piety. It's that you hate discipline; you cast my words behind you. I don't need bulls or goats; every animal is mine already – the cattle on a thousand hills. If you really want to offer me something, offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High, which is to say The Greater Good.

Or, as it is summed up in the sublime refrain – another aria here in the first chapter of Isaiah:

Make yourselves clean; cease to do evil.
Learn to do good; rescue the oppressed.
Plead for the widow; defend every orphan.
Come says the Lord; let's argue it out.
Though your sins are scarlet, they shall be snow.
They are like crimson, they shall be like wool.
If you are willing, you shall eat your fill.
But if you refuse, you shall be eaten.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Set aside earthly things. Does this mean don't make a living? I should think a loving God would want us all happy, and happily employed. There should be an impossible chicken at least in every pot, a cheery fire and a rose bush or two, a

blue room for two room, where every day's a holiday. Again, it is not that living and prospering is wrong, it's what we're living for that matters. And from those to whom much has been given, much is demanded in the great cosmic economy of God. If we are living to gain more, it must be that we aim to give more away.

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom, if you sell your possessions, and give alms. If your greatest treasure is in your soul, where no thief can come near and no moth can destroy, you will be happy. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Sometimes Biblical metaphors are hard to relate to, to say the least. We don't do much overt animal sacrifice any more, for example. Our Eucharist is symbolic. But we certainly continue to rationalize bloodshed for our lifestyle, and consider it the price of doing business. Likewise, for those of us who have not spent much time being either one, these master-and-servant stories can be elusive if we leave our imagination at the door. Today, Luke has Jesus saying that God leaves us in charge of the house. If we party all the time and treat each other badly and trash the place and pass out in the living room, when God comes home to check on us, she ain't gonna be happy. But if we take care of the place and each other, and use our talents, and have someone stand watch, God will put on an apron and make us dinner at the end of the day, no matter how late it is!

It is an attitude we must take, more than a set of laws we must follow. Here, from Robert Browning's poem, *Rabbi ben Ezra*: "Let us not always say, 'In spite of this flesh to-day I strove, made headway, gained ground upon the whole!' As the bird wings and sings, let us cry, 'All good things are ours, nor

soul helps flesh more now, than flesh helps soul!” The flesh can help the soul as the soul can help the flesh. Move a muscle; change a thought.

The critic Thom Hartmann begs the question: “Is the essential nature of humans to cooperate or to dominate, to have democracy or to have kingdom? If you look at our culture, cooperation is considered a relatively low value and competition is considered the highest value. We celebrate the most powerful competitors.”

Kids and I went on our biennial junket to Chavez Ravine the other day, and watched dem bums trounce our revered St. Louis Cardinals. It is always a strange feeling to be the quiet ones in a crowd of tens of thousands of yelling, cheering people. It’s always a little disturbing, because, as Red Sanders, the famous Bruins’ football coach once said, after a stinging loss to the Trojans, “Men, I’ll be honest. Winning isn’t everything; Men, it’s the only thing!” I’m told he said it to a gym class at Cal Poly in 1950.

But if you talk to people in aboriginal and indigenous cultures, you find that the highest societal value is cooperation. Competition is of very low value, and competition beyond certain boundaries is considered mental illness. We have a victory addiction that gets in the way of our godliness program. Although Our Father in Heaven, so to speak, is not wholly disappointed with us, God is, as they say in those surveys, ‘somewhat dissatisfied.’ It’s partly a matter of education. That’s why Jesus is quoted as saying, “That slave who knew what the master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do it, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know and did

badly will only get a light beating.” It is up to us to seek, take to heart and share the Word with all who have ears to listen.

God will never be completely satisfied until our frame of reference changes from one of distracted pursuit of the fleeting and its adherent self-interest, to grateful connectedness and devotion to the nurture of Creation. Marc Barash writes: “You have to change your mind. You have to change your perceptions. If you change your perceptions, the world changes. Instead of, ‘What do I get out of this?’ it’s ‘How do I bring out the good that’s in you?’”

With this transformed view, enough will be enough, and for that sufficiency we will be grateful. In the words of Thomas Merton, “To be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything God has given us -- and God has given us everything. ...Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience.”

Let’s not kid ourselves, Jesus is adamant about excess wealth being a paralyzing poison to the kind of life God would have us lead. But a renewed relationship with God and our fellow living things, the refreshed point of view that Jesus exhorts us to will naturally lead away from excess. It is the distracting prioritization of this world, not the enjoyment of it, that God would have us give up. Because God doesn’t just want us to be happy and well for awhile, God wants us to be happy and well eternally.

Rule 22 of Shams Tabriz, the Sufi Dervish: “Life is a temporary loan and this world is nothing but a sketchy imitation of Reality. Only children would mistake a toy for the real thing. And yet human beings either become infatuated

with their toys or disrespectfully break them and throw them aside. In this life stay away from all kinds of extremes; they will destroy your inner balance.”

These thinkers all seem to be telling us to walk through our lives as if godliness were possible in all things, that no human pursuit is worthwhile outside a context of love.

Let’s give old Browning the last word on this topic:

All that is, at all, lasts ever, past recall;
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure.
What entered into thee, *that* was, is, and shall be.
Time's wheel runs back or stops: the Potter and clay endure.
God fixed thee mid this dance of plastic circumstance;
This present, that thou, forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:
Machinery just meant to give thy soul its bent, to try thee and
Turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.