



CHOIR ANNIVERSARY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, August 21, 2011

Cleopatrck Lacey, Guest Lectionary Commentator
Pastor, Mount Zion Baptist Church, Griffin, GA

Lection – Colossians 3:16 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 16) Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Choir Anniversary Day (which perhaps more properly should be called Worship and Arts Division Day) is a day celebrated in some shape, form, or fashion by almost every African American church, although not all churches celebrate this occasion annually. In the African American Church, music is considered a major component of the worship service. Whether in a rural or an urban setting, worshippers come to hear what the choir (whether it is the mass choir, the praise singers, the youth choir, the children or combined choirs) will present on any given Sunday morning. As its name clearly indicates, the day is a day to give thanks to those who week in and week out provide the songs of Zion for our worship services. Choirs and worship departments aid in ushering in the presence of the Lord; they prepare us to receive the Word of God and in some instances present the Word through song. The idea of a Choir Day is to present a formal and open musical platform to the community. In the words of Mellonee Burnim, it is a time to “honor the significance of music and those dedicated to bringing music to life on Sunday morning and at many other times when the need arises.”¹

Within the last decade or so praise dancers, praise teams, mime dancers, hand bell and flag and ribbon dancers/twirlers have also become part of what now comprises worship and arts divisions of some churches. Choir Day (also called Choir Anniversary) is an occasion to bring together choirs of all ages, instrumentalists, and in many settings guest artists, who present selections from their musical repertoire.

Although congregational singing is still a mainstay in many churches, the choir is still the entity selected and I hope inspired of God to lead the church in singing “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” to God. Let’s be honest: Our worship would be less inviting, exciting, and uplifting were it not for those saints who attend rehearsal after rehearsal to provide the songs of Zion that complement the Word of God and our worship of God. On this day we give them our unlimited thanks and appreciation for participating in the important ministry of rendering songs unto the Lord for the edification of the Lord’s people.

Finally, Choir Day is a time for one to think about to whom they are singing and for whom they are singing, and it is a time to recommit to the service of witnessing for Christ through the worship arts.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Colossians 3:16-17

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I love choirs, praise teams, hand bell choirs, praise dancers, mime artists, and flag and ribbon twirlers. Not being a singer but a lover of music, especially gospel music, I am indebted to those who provide the sweet sounds of harmony for the Church. Much has changed since the days of Thomas Dorsey, Roberta Martin and others who introduced gospel music to the Church and since the choir became a signal part of black church worship due to persons such as Mattie Moss Clark and Reverend James Cleveland.

In some churches the majority of the singing is now done by small ensembles with choirs singing on certain Sundays and on special days on a church’s calendar. But as for me and my house, though I have nothing against praise teams and ensembles, I want a choir to sing every Sunday. I want to see the aggregation of people that includes those with specialized training to sing along with those who can only hold a tune until someone else catches it, but sing with great sincerity of their gracious God and our Risen Savior. I want to see a group dressed homogenously (whether in robes or youth in white shirts and khaki pants). I want to see a group in harmony that provides those in the pews and in the pulpit with an example of what can be done when we unify to achieve a purpose (in this case), singing the melodious songs of Zion.

A songwriter said, “Over my head, I hear music in the air. There must be a God somewhere.” Now, while the songwriter here is not referring to a choir, when I hear a spirit-filled, prepared, proud-to-sing choir, I can exclaim, “In the church, I hear music in the air—there must be a God somewhere.”

Writing this commentary on Colossians 3:16-17 made me appreciative of choirs. But it also reminded me that it is the responsibility of those who know the word of God to live, spread, and then vocalize the word. Christian singers will be held accountable for internalizing God’s word and then proclaiming God’s words through all genres of sacred music.

Further, churches through their biblical and Christian education training are directed to ensure that opportunities are developed and designed so that the word of God is studied. Through proper study, African American church folk gain information so that they can conclude that the lyrics of

the hymns, psalms, and spirituals they hear are Christ-centered, biblically based, and appropriate for the worship hour.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians, usually referred to simply as Colossians, is the 12th book of the New Testament. It was written to the church in Colossae, a small Phrygian city near Laodicea and approximately 100 miles from Ephesus in Asia Minor.

Scholars have increasingly questioned Paul's authorship of the epistle. However, Paul being the author of the epistle has been defended with equal strength.

Let the Word and the word Dwell in You Richly

Our scripture calls for a quality of life together that mutually edifies and enriches our fellowship with one another because of the Word and the word. The late, great pulpiteer Charles Haddon Spurgeon said of Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you." Remember, dear friends that Christ himself is the Word of God, and recollect also that the Scriptures are the word of the Word. They are "words of Christ."... Remember, also, that the Scriptures do, in effect, come to us from Christ. Every promise of this blessed Book is a promise of Christ, "for all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us; they all come to us through Christ, God speaks them to us through him as the Mediator."²

The Word cannot dwell richly within us unless we read it, hear it, study it, pray for revelation concerning it, and live it out. With the gospel in us, it provides the ordering principle for us as God's people. "Let the word of Christ dwell richly in you" also denotes what should be the character of Christian worship and our lives outside of worship. Surface attention to the Word will not allow it to dwell richly within us. We will end up with a zeal of God that is not according to knowledge. How well can any choir sing the sacred without knowing the Savior and the God about whom they are singing?

Modernly, we have heard many opine about the state of music in the black church. Some argue that it is now tied too tightly to the secular world. Others argue that the music is weak and not comprised of stout lyrics that one can lean on in their dark and difficult moments. Instead, they posit, the lyrics are too often just pop seven-eleven songs. A seven-eleven song is one in which the same seven words of a verse are sung eleven times. Each generation will always have concerns about the music of the generation that comes after theirs. However, the concern that our choir lofts are filled with music that shows gratitude to Christ and evidences a high Christology can only be satisfied when churches have choirs that study the word so that it "dwells richly" in them.

Teaching and Admonishing

"Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom" The instruction called for here means that Christians will be held accountable for teaching the word and for admonishing one another according to the dictates of the word. We will be held accountable for not heeding the warning

coming from God and for not warning those who need caution. We need to be sure that Christians understand the word of God as never before. As I heard one preacher say, “We are to be a Mutual Instruction Society.” With only a zeal, how can choir members teach and admonish one another “in all wisdom”? If there is disharmony, bickering, or in-fighting in a choir one can be certain that its members are not teaching and admonishing one another in love using the word of God as their guide.

Sing with Gratitude in your Heart

The verse concludes, “and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” What a privilege God has given to us to celebrate His grace and mercy through music. One of the greatest books in existence is the hymnbook. A myriad of lyrics set to tunes, some hundreds of years old, can stir the depths of our emotions and bring tears to our eyes, clapping to our hands, and even running to our feet. How could it not if the choir “sings the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” with gratitude in their hearts? If a choir or any musical entity in the Church sings of the Savior with gratitude in their hearts for His life, death, and resurrection, it touches us. We too become grateful. We too get happy. We too begin to praise God for so great a Savior, for the works of the Savior in our life, and most importantly for our salvation!

Celebration

The text stresses the importance of internalizing the word of God and then transposing its messages into melodies. Worship through song moves us to express our joy in the Lord through joyfully singing the Lord’s songs. When the Word dwells in us richly, we can’t help but praise God. For it is through the Word that we learn that we are divinely made. It is through the Word that we learn that God loves the world, including us. It is through the Word that we learn that for our sake, God sent God’s only begotten son to not only give us life and life more abundantly but to also give us eternal life. How can we not praise a God like that!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The announcement directing Christians to teach, learn, and sing; the melodious sounds of believers singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; the sounds of church music instruments that accompany choirs; and

Sights: A choir marching into a church; choirs in burgundy and white; and expressions of joy from knowing God’s word and singing the Lord’s songs.

III. Other Material That Preachers and Others Can Use

- “The spirituals are the story of black people’s historical strivings for earthly freedom rather than the otherworldly projections of the hopeless Africans who forgot about their homeland.”

“The black spiritual is an expression of the slaves’ determination to be in a society that seeks to eliminate their being.”

—James Cone. The Spirituals and the Blues. pp. 15–16

- “The African-American generation of the 1950s and 1960s, beginning in 1955, took the songs and hymns of our ancestors into our marches, jail cells, and mass meetings and fashioned the faith of a movement that reintroduced the African drum, chant, and music in an undisguised and transforming symphony of protest and revolution.

—Otis Moss, Jr. African American Heritage Hymnal. p. vii

Notes

1. Burnim, Mellonee, Guest Cultural Resource Commentary Writer, Choir Anniversary, August 9, 2009. Online location: www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org accessed 21 March 2011
2. Spurgeon, Charles Haddon. “Christ Indwelling Word.” Preached in 1900. Online location: http://www.spurgeon.org/index/r_col.htm accessed 21 March 2011