



JUSTICE EMPHASIS SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, October 11, 2009

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Lection – Isaiah 58:1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. (v. 2) Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. (v. 3) “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble

ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. (v. 4) Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. (v. 5) Is such the fast I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? (v. 6) Is not this the fast that I choose; to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? (v. 7) Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

When we observe Justice Emphasis Sunday in every African American church, it serves to remind the community that there are issues of urgent concern occurring outside the walls of our local church that demand our awareness and our response. It is far too easy for preachers and churches to become so focused on the things that concern their own congregation that they forget the call of God to give our attention to the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the sick, and those who are imprisoned (Matt. 25: 31-46).

James Ward and Christine Ward speak to this tendency to think and act locally when they write:

The natural inclination of the Christian community, like all religious communities, is to adapt its witness of faith to its most immediate human needs. In doing this, the community always runs the risk of obscuring the wider dimensions of the gospel, particularly the wider implications of God’s demand for righteousness and justice. What is needed, therefore, is preaching that recovers these wider dimensions and illuminates the ways in which the community obscures them.¹

This liturgical moment reminds us that preaching must, on certain occasions, set out to focus on those wider dimensions of the gospel. While churches must be attentive to certain immediate concerns such as budget challenges, building maintenance, membership development and nurture, and the planning of worship services, Justice Emphasis Sunday shifts the focus of the congregation from what is happening to them as an isolated congregation to what is happening to us as a nation and as members of a global community.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 58:1-7

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

In many of our black churches, the work of justice and the preaching that can awaken and drive that work has been pushed aside in favor of an emphasis on praise and worship. The scriptures are clear on the point that people who are anxious to raise holy hands but slow

to extend a helping hand to their neighbors in need will not enjoy God's favor. Many church worship bulletins have a double heading that appears on opposite sides of the page; enter to worship – depart to serve. Isaiah 58 is a warning against allowing those two tasks to be separated. We do not enter to worship as an end in itself. Instead, our worship should equip us, and empower us, and convince us of the service we must offer in pursuit of a just and equitable society.

This is especially true for African American churches, which, as James Cone reminds us, were birthed out of protest over the unjust practices and the immoral prejudices that black people had to endure for so long.² We, of all people, should maintain the close connection between worship and service and between religious observances and demonstrating righteousness and working for justice.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Isaiah 58:1-7 is representative of a genre of prophetic literature that seeks to make the point that God is never pleased when people offer a series of carefully orchestrated religious observances as alternatives to an aggressive pursuit of justice and righteousness, not only for themselves, but for the neediest members of society. Over and over again, the Bible condemns those people who are very careful about observing every detail of some religious ritual or festival or legally required observance, but who are very lax when it comes to caring about the needs of their neighbors in areas such as hunger, homelessness, poverty, and various forms of exploitation.

In verses 1-2, Isaiah is called upon to rebuke the people of Israel for saying they want to be close to God but who are unwilling to obey the most basic of God's commands - caring for one's neighbors. In verses 3-4, Isaiah employs a kind of humor when he describes those people who wonder why God seems to care so little about and pays such little attention to all of their religious activities; in this case, it is the ritual of fasting. The truth is, God is far more concerned about people of faith working for justice that benefits others than about people of faith who are attempting to impress God with their religiosity. The very people who are so busy engaging in a fast as a sign of their religious faithfulness are also exploiting their own workers (verse 3) and arguing and quarreling with one another, probably over which of them is more religious (verse 4).

The message of verses 5-7 is that God does not want, did not request or require, and will not honor or be pleased with, people who offer religious rituals that are unaccompanied by a deep concern for the neediest within their own community and beyond. "Is not this the fast that I choose...caring, feeding, clothing, sharing, and setting the captives free!" That parallels Jesus who condemned the Pharisees who were equally careful about observing every tiny detail of the religious law, but who "ignored the weightier matters of the law; justice, mercy and faith." (Matt. 23:23)

That same message is at the heart of Amos 5:18-24, Micah 6:6-8, and the Great Judgment scene in Matthew 25: 31-44. Worship in all of its forms is important, but it is no substitute for the pursuit of justice. To be as clear as possible, Isaiah 58:5-7 even states

the areas in which justice should be pursued: to break the grip of oppression, to release the captives, to share one's bread and other resources with those who are needy, and to open one's hands, hearts and even one's home to those who are destitute and dependent upon the mercy and generosity of the community.

Verses 5-6 offer yet another dichotomy that Isaiah wants us to consider - namely, a focus on personal humility in the presence of God that is not matched by true obedience to what God demands from us. There are many people for whom piety is the be-all and end-all of true religion. They keep an accurate count of the hours they spend in church, in choir rehearsal, in a board meeting, in private prayer, in Bible study, and in attendance at various other church events. That involvement in church life seems to them to be a sufficient investment in a relationship with God.

In many instances, as with the Old Testament focus on fasting, or giving something up for God, there are contemporary Christians who are also content to view their relationship with God through the prism of the things they, too, have "given up" for God's sake. They may have given up some social activities or associations. They may have given up the use of cosmetics and fancy clothes and jewelry in an attempt to present themselves as being unsullied by the world. Whether the issue is church busyness or sacrificing some matter of personal self-indulgence, the danger is the same: people think that, in so doing, they are doing that which should surely please God. Isaiah asks such people if that is all they intend to do for God. If that is the case, then, Isaiah 58:4 has something to say to them:

Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

Verse 7 raises one point deserving of some attention, and it has to do with the objects or beneficiaries of our acts of justice, mercy, and compassion. Isaiah suggests that we ought to be directing our efforts toward our own kin (our own flesh and blood in the NIV translation). Sometimes we are quick to respond to needs in the refugee camps in Darfur in the Sudan, or on behalf of tsunami victims in Thailand, or Katrina victims in New Orleans. Meanwhile, there may be people in our own family who are hungry or sick, or in some other form of distress, and we do not respond with equal urgency and/or generosity. We should be careful that, in our haste to feed the starving children in India or China, we do not fail to notice the starving children in our own neighborhoods, churches, and families.

Celebration

Well done, good and faithful servant. That is what every Christian hopes to hear Jesus say about them and about their service in the Lord's name. When our preaching encourages and motivates people to move out of a singular focus on personal salvation and engage the issues of justice on behalf of others, God will say "well done" concerning our ministry. When those who hear our sermons take action on the issues addressed both in Isaiah 58: 1-7 and Matthew 25: 31-45, they will hear God say well done about their life and work.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: People fasting; employers oppressing workers; persons humbly bowing down; bread shared with the hungry; those with homes bringing in the homeless; the naked being covered;

Sounds: Shouting like a trumpet; persons quarreling, persons striking with wicked fists; and

Colors: Grey ashes and black sackcloth made of goat's hair.

III. Other Considerations for this Text

This passage requires an appreciation for the efforts and effects of fasting. This is an important spiritual discipline, as it points toward a closer relationship with God. However, Jesus clearly reminds us that fasting ought to be done in a way that does not draw attention to ourselves. In Isaiah 58, the people wanted to be seen going through the rigors of fasting: hunger, feeling faint, reminding others of what they were giving up for God's sake. How different is that approach from what Jesus says in Matthew 6:16-17, when he urges his disciples to not do what the hypocrites do and appear in public with sad faces? "They have their reward."

The reference to "sack cloth and ashes" offers another descriptive detail that can enrich our understanding of this passage and of the culture of ancient Israel. Sack cloth was a rough, almost burlap type of material that people would put on in place of their regular clothing when they wanted to demonstrate sorrow and repentance, or when they were giving visible expression to some moment of grief. Ashes were poured over the head in order to demonstrate the same set of emotions. The use of sack cloth and ashes was a way for a true believer to say to God that they were deeply sorry for their sins, and they wanted that sorrow to be visible for all to see.

Isaiah's response to the use of sack cloth and ashes is that the people only seemed sorry about their personal sins against God, but not about the condition of their brothers and sisters and their failure to act to remedy their condition of hurt or hardship. It is reminiscent of the condemnation leveled by God against Israel in Amos 6 when God says:

*Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria... You lie on beds of ivory and lounge on your couches. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasts (**and your fasts**) will end.*

IV. A Recommendation for Preaching and Teaching

One of the best resources for helping African American preachers balance their emphasis on justice with other legitimate concerns that may come before them is The Heart of Black Preaching, by Cleophus J. LaRue. He says there are five domains of experience out of which preaching in the black church can be drawn. They are: (1) personal piety; (2) care of the soul; (3) social justice; (4) corporate concerns; and, (5) maintenance of the institutional church.³

Notes

1. Ward, James and Christine Ward. Preaching from the Prophets. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995. p. 11.
2. Cone, James. Black Power and Black Theology. New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1969. p. 94.
3. LaRue, Cleophus J. The Heart of Black Preaching. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001. pp. 22-23.