

15 Pentecost - 13 September 2009 - Proper 19 B  
Proverbs 1:20-33; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38  
James V. Stockton

One break-in was bad enough. Add to that another one, more severe, ten days later. Add these to the grief we still bear from July and August and one must wonder, is this just part of what one must endure and, given that we are Christians, must endure with and especially stiff upper lip? We've been through rather a lot here at ECR in a just short amount of time. So, is it our role as Christians to endure all this with particularly stoic disaffection? In terms of what we hear in the reading from the Gospel today, is this just our collective cross to bear?

People use the phrase in ways that suggest that it is so. Someone may be caring for a loved one who is chronically ill; someone else has been passed over for a promotion at work; a community has lost a beloved friend; a community's sense of safety has been violated by people whose values violently contradict its own.

And if people find consolation in the notion that somehow this is just their cross to bear, then far be it from you or me to deny them that comfort. But it must be said, at least among you and me together, that the God that we are here today to worship and praise does not inflict pain and suffering on anyone. So, from where, then, comes the common wisdom that misfortune is sign of the cross that Christ Jesus places upon the shoulders of those who follow him?

Let me suggest that more often than not, the Wisdom of God contradicts that which passes for the wisdom of the commonly held. The Old Testament reading for this morning speaks to this. The writer of the Proverbs takes literary license and turns Wisdom itself into a personification of God. She speaks to the people on the paths in and out of the city; she calls to the people from the center of town. It is a way of reminding the people that God is not distant, and that God's nearness to them is intended to be a source of encouragement and comfort.

But if and when the people forget God or neglect their relationship with God, the fact that God is near enough to notice can become for them a source quite the opposite. Historically, they have always done so, and so in the times when the proverbs are written, the ancient

Hebrews as God's people are capitulating more and more to the cultures, beliefs, and values of the less godly but more superstitious world around them. In appearance, yes, the people are worshipping God. But they also are worshipping the idols of the peoples around them.

And the point here is not that God has a fragile ego and so gets hurt feelings and takes out all that godly spite on the people. The point is that God has called the people to an understanding of God and enabled them to attain it. It allows them to experience God as good not mean, as caring not capricious, as creative not destructive. And having these insights into God the people of God are able to be a source of blessing for the rest of the world in which they live.

The deities of the people and societies around them are imagined often as angry, petty, fierce, unforgiving. They have fragile egos, selfish ways, and must be appeased if there is to be hope of good fortune. In other words, not literally but metaphorically, these are gods created in the image of humankind. So, if the people of God capitulate to the common wisdom all around them, to the simplistic interpretation of things that dominates and guides the wider world, then, what can become of their relationship with God?

Can one genuinely trust God, on the one hand, but behave on the other hand as though God is a brute vindictive entity that has to be cajoled with human pain and suffering? Can a person genuinely regard his fellow man, her fellow woman, as an equal reflection of God but at the same time fear or hate the other person as an adversary that one must crush and defeat?

And so Wisdom, in the Book of Proverbs, says that some things are, for God's people, truly either/or. The day will come when the people's decision to ignore her will bring inevitable regret for having done so. The people of God will experience a painful realization that God can provide for them no easy fix, no quick resolution of the mess that they've made by becoming well-versed in common wisdom but neglecting the higher Wisdom of God.

But the point for today is that the hardship that Wisdom predicts for the people of God will not be their 'cross to bear,' not as people use the phrase today and certainly not as Jesus uses it in the Gospel reading for today. Wisdom will still be present; God will still be with the people.

Jesus needs his followers to know who he is. And this is not because Christ Jesus has a fragile ego and he resents it when people misunderstand about him being the Savior and the Son of God. To the contrary, it is because the better the people know who he is, then the better they will understand who they themselves in God. Are the disciples listening to views of the world around them?' he wonders. 'I know people are talking,' he says. 'So, who are people saying that I am? And, more important,' he goes on, 'who do *you* think I am.?''

And what we hear is that the world is categorizing Jesus as best it can; all according to past experience, and, to some degree, according to the best way to manage Jesus in a way that maybe keeps him interesting but also prevents him from complicating things too much. They will allow that Jesus could be a prophet. Maybe he is like one the lesser-known prophets of old, or even like one of the seriously influential prophetic figures from ancient times or from their own day.

But only the disciples seem able and willing to recognize Jesus as the Savior that he is. And if that is some relief to Jesus, yet he seems also to recognize that they are not so fully informed that they are ready to tell anyone else. 'Don't tell others about me being the Messiah,' he says. And the wisdom of his command shows itself immediately. As soon as Jesus informs them what it means for him to be the Messiah, Peter and the rest of the disciples object. 'The Messiah, *our* Messiah, must never be defeated; not even if it is just in appearance.' Notice that even with his promise that the Messiah will be raised up again after three days dead in the tomb, yet Jesus' vision of what it is to be the Messiah fails to find a welcome in these, his closest friends. Jesus could give in; he could subscribe to the world's vision of things, even the vision predominant among his own people. He could accede to the role of a prophet, who, though typically popular with most people, nevertheless, tends to avoid the

cross. But Jesus cannot capitulate; not to the common wisdom of the day.

Often, the things that matter most really are 'either/or.' Jesus needs his followers to know that as attractive as it may become to believe that they can be their most true selves respond most truly to their calling through an amalgam of the most convenient elements of a buffet of values, nevertheless, they, like he, must resist the diabolical impulse to try to behave as though they can genuinely trust God on the one hand, but then on the other hand, shape their goals and their future according to the values and practices commonly-held by those all around them.

If it remains a symbol of death at all, the cross represents the death in our lives of those values, goals, and visions of our lives, and of the means to meet them, that are governed by simplistic ignorance of the mysteries of God and the rejection of God's call. The cross that Christ bears is a ghastly instrument of death that God turns, paradoxically and miraculously, into a vessel of life. The cross that the disciples of Jesus are called to bear, including you and I, is the same. In times of hardship, even when worry piles on top of grief and fear lies down on it all, God is still present.

Remember this today, tomorrow. Where you are, where I am, there is the image of God. Where any of us are gathered together, there is the Love of God. Where you go today, or where I go, wherever we are tomorrow or the next day, contrary to common sense, Christ still carries us. And contrary to common wisdom, we are a community that still take up the cross, and whose fellowship still lightens the load. We remain a people who hold one another in sadness, and who welcome each other home to joy. We celebrate as a people raised up in the Love of God for each of us. And we share with the world around us the call to the Love of God for all.

And so may Almighty God, by whose Spirit we are guided in our various joys and occupations, grant that we may accomplish that which God entrusts to us, and by that same grace, be found always worthy in our Lord Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and for ever. Amen.