

Thoughts on the biblical texts for Epiphany 6 January 16 2020

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

I Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

On Sundays the lector reads the lessons and then says, “Word of God, Word of life.” I find that problematic. In what sense are any of these passages the “word of God”? The fact of the matter is that they are the words of ancient Palestinians who are trying to understand their lives against the backdrop of their tradition’s commitment to Yahweh amidst the other gods worshipped by their neighbors. And their starting point, like that of pretty much all ancient peoples, is that everything that happens is caused by God (or “the gods”). The Israelites had the notion that they had a sort of covenant with Yahweh, which entailed their commitment to obey Yahweh’s laws and worship him alone in return for Yahweh’s protection and all the provisions of life.

But bad stuff happened to the Israelites, and how were they to account for that? So they figured that it must be that they had displeased Yahweh by not obeying him or worshipping him alone (“whoring after false gods”). The book of Deuteronomy shows the epitome of this way of thinking. “If you follow Yahweh and his ways, you will be blessed and all will be well. If you stray away from Yahweh, you will be cursed, and you’re going to suffer from famine or attacks from your enemies or disease.” It’s that sort of thinking that we see in this text. I don’t take it as the way things are or the way God is, but as an example of the

struggle to understand oneself, one's nation and God by an ancient people, a small people in a desert land surrounded by powerful and threatening neighbors. I don't take it directly as a message for us.

In the case of I Corinthians, we have a letter from Paul to a congregation that was behaving atrociously, quarreling jealously, as he says. This was the congregation where the well-off members would show up with a delicious packed lunch and not share it with those who couldn't afford one. It was a congregation divided by factions, which is why Paul refers to Apollos vs. himself. So he is trying to get them to be more of a community. In the last verse he describes them as "co-workers" with God. "We're in this together. We are Christ's body. Let's seek unity instead of self-aggrandizement." That's what he's getting at here. So once again, it's useful to see the text in its context. It was written for Christians in Corinth, not for us. We are witnesses to an ancient confrontation, and we can learn from it as an interested observer, not as the actual audience.

The gospel for the day, Matthew 5, also reflects its author's distinctive interests. Matthew's gospel promotes a "higher righteousness." His message is that Jesus didn't abolish the Torah, but went beyond it. It's about observing the spirit of the Law, not merely its letter. So the oppositions you read in this text ("You have heard. . . , but I say. . .") is Jesus (or possibly Matthew) comparing the tradition to the deepened commitment expected of those who don't simply follow the Torah slavishly, but actually try to embody it in their pattern of life. It places Jesus solidly in the prophetic tradition, calling for a

change of heart more than a legalistic scrupulosity. That's what you see here. E.g. the proscription of divorce is aimed at men(!), who were allowed by the rules to ditch their wives on a whim, abandoning them as poor outcasts in a totally patriarchal society. So Jesus (Matthew?) is coming down hard on men who would treat their spouses so flippantly and cruelly. And the other contrasts are similar, calling on his audience not simply to follow legal prescriptions, but to go beyond them to a life based on love and compassion. That is Matthew's "higher righteousness."

We have gotten so used to reading the Bible as though it's a straightforward address to us. That makes many of its texts extremely disturbing. But when seen in their context, an ancient world context(!), they become interesting windows into another thought world, and they can challenge us or comfort us at a different level.

We can still take Biblical texts seriously while acknowledging that they don't spring unmediated from the mind of God. No, they catalogue very human struggles by an ancient people to make sense of a world that continues to perplex us.