

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year C

25th Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Amos 8.4-7)

Racketeering

Amos is one of the first of the prophets whose sayings were gathered together and written down. He was peacefully pasturing sheep in the southern hill country near Bethlehem, when the Lord summoned him to trudge northwards and denounce the racketeering of rich against poor in Samaria. Archaeologists have shown us the traces of it. The capital was moved westwards to link with Mediterranean trade: marriage alliances with merchant princes, grand palaces displacing slum dwellings, expensive (and idolatrous) ivory inlays on the furniture. The fat cats would not listen to Amos, told him he was not welcome in their country, sent him packing and continued to fleece the helpless poor, for they controlled the money supply and the means of exchange - until the mighty power of Assyria swept down and destroyed them all.

For us today, perhaps the equivalent is rich nations profiteering from poor, unequal business deals, unfair trade, 'international aid' packages to dispose of excess production, the rich growing richer, the poor growing poorer in a thousand ways. The message of Amos is linked to the gospel by the final sentence: use wealth to make friends in heaven by your generosity.

Question:

Can you do anything to prevent exploitation of the poor?

Second reading:

(1 Timothy 2.1-7)

Universal Salvation

As the gospel message moved out of the restricted world of Judaism and came into contact with the larger world of the Greco-Roman Empire, new questions arose for Christians. The first question here was relationship to the civil authorities, and the answer: accept them and pray for them, in their attempts to provide a worthy framework for human life. The second question, a pressing one in our post-Christian society: can non-Christians be saved?

Here the scripture tells us that God wills all people to be saved and come to knowledge of the truth, and that there is one mediator, Christ Jesus. How is this so? Is it enough to grope towards a God 'in signs and symbols' (Vatican II), accepting a power outside ourselves, to which all are indebted for existence itself, the ultimate authority in human life? And the mediator? How can people be saved by Christ if they do not know him? Is it enough to acknowledge our human deficiencies and failures and lay them in hope at the feet of a loving Saviour whom this unknown God will surely provide to bring the creation to fulfilment? What a responsibility have we, in expressing our values in such a way that others may share them?

Question:

How can all people be saved by Christ, even those who do not know him?

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Gospel:

(Luke 16.1-13)

The Dishonest Steward

This parable can be deeply disquieting if we take it as an allegory, that is, if every element in the story is meant (as in Matthew's Parable of the Wheat and the Tares) to have an equivalent in reality. We can't have God praising the steward for his frauds!

No, the point of the story is simply the steward's energy and inventiveness, his shrewdness as a 'child of this age'. A lot more thought goes into how to make money than into how to spend it to the best advantage of others! The danger and encumbrance of wealth is such that inventiveness and energy is needed in using it to win friends in heaven. The full cleverness of the story is more subtle: Jews were forbidden to lend to Jews at interest. The steward cuts off the interest from the bills of his master's debtors, for oil was commonly lent at 100 per cent interest, and wheat at 25 per cent. It was easy to return olive oil adulterated with cheap sesame oil, but if I scatter handfuls of chaff in the grain I give you back, you will spot it immediately. So the steward makes his master obey the Law! The sayings added at the end hit the nail on the head: no slave can serve two masters, God and money.

Question:

Do I take more trouble over what I want for myself or what I owe to God?
