

## God's Business Plan -- Epiphany 4B

As Charles Dickens wrote, the wisdom of the ancestors is in the simile. Throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus feeds us God's wisdom in similes, in hopes that we will 'Shema, Israel,' 'Hear, Israel.' And not just hear, hear and heed. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed... The Kingdom of God is like a man... Again and again, Jesus gives us these extended similes that we know as parables, in an effort to fill our hearts with the transforming energy of God's wisdom. For we are an argumentative and forgetful and argumentative species, a stiff-necked people!

In today's readings we have heard, not only similes, but direct wisdom from a number of our spiritual ancestors, wisdom that we would do well to hear and heed, wisdom that we argue with and forget at our peril. Moses and the Psalmist and Paul give us clear, direct parameters for religion, painting the alternatives to their wisdom as indeed perilous, not to say disastrous for ourselves and those we influence.

But their wisdom has little to do with what we know as religion, and everything to do with our relationship with God. The radical core of that relationship, according to Moses is a matter of hearing and heeding prophets, who themselves are held to exacting standards. To follow the Psalmist, we must continually study God, praise God and glorify God, enough to quieten those insistent voices that want to convince us of our own greatness. And if we are listening to Paul, we must accept that the most

knowledgeable among us are in the most danger of undermining God's kingdom.

The trappings and powers and structures of religion are important – if they align with God's Word as spake by the prophets – but they are not the foundation of God's relationship with humankind. That foundation is surely the Word itself: spoken, interpreted, debated, agreed upon. None of these words of wisdom we heard today were delivered by people claiming to be part of any established institutional religion. Moses and the people he led were hoping for the promised land, but they weren't in it yet. The Psalmist is thought to have been writing when Israel was in exile, far from any temple. Paul is writing and preaching to a neonatal church, fragile in the extreme and frequently in danger from the powers that had taken Jesus to Calvary. Today we are on the extreme other end, historically, of the Church's great influence. There is no longer an overwhelming societal expectation of piety. The Church does not control what goes on among governments. We are fragmented by both outright disputes and also denominational differences. God has been exiled from the hearts and minds of many, many people.

But none of this has any effect on the Word of God, as spoken by the prophets, as Shema'ed by us and acted upon in the world. None of these exigencies has anything to do with the Word of God made flesh in Jesus. None of this can separate us from the love of God in Christ. None of this can stop us from being the body of a living Christ at work in the world and proving ourselves to be both from and for God through acts of justice and mercy and humility. The

wisdom of the ancestors will help us keep our eyes on the task at hand, if we can only hear and heed.

Like everybody, I had two grandfathers. Like the luckiest among you, I got to know both of mine pretty well. They were both wise men, business and civic leaders, who rose from modest beginnings. From one, I got my first two names. He was a storyteller and builder; he constructed the first home he and my grandmother shared -- out of rocks. His motto: "No deal is a good deal unless it's good for both parties." That sounds like the Golden Rule, St. Louis style.

The other grandfather gave me my last name. He became a business and government executive, a head of companies and departments. He ran things. One of his favorite pieces of advice about working in groups was to always ask the questions: "Who do I report to? What do I do? Who reports to me?" That would be Mosaic Law, American style.

We have to accept and embrace the awareness that answers to these questions will enable success, not just in business and bureaucracy, but also in a godly life for ourselves and for the Church. At least that is what Moses and the Psalmist and Paul are trying to tell us. We, like the prophets report only to God. The prophets are to tell the truth and we are to listen to what they say and do what they say. But who reports to us? None other than God's very self – accountable until the ages of ages to the people who obey God's precepts.

“But, but, but,” we argue – “we want credit!” Listen to the Psalmist: Fear God. (Fear is a little misleading here, ‘revere’ might be a better word. In the modern sense, what we are to fear is not so much God as God-lessness.) So, get wise, revere God and give God all the credit, that’s who you report to. What you do is sing praise in the assembly of the faithful, glorify, fulfill. Simple. But who reports to us? Are not the covenants of God the promises of God, the presence of Jesus report enough for us? “Keep singing until it is enough for you,” says the Psalmist.

And Saint Paul, what is his business formula for a life in Christ? The Corinthians are so smart and educated and sophisticated, that they have talked themselves right past the first question: To whom do we report? Well, “God, of course,” say the ancestors. But these Corinthians are reporting to themselves and each other instead, and ignoring the effects of their behavior on those who would be led by them. Paul insists that the industry God demands is mutual care. If instead we count on writing our own ticket, based on our own knowledge and desires alone, we are no longer reporting to God and will inevitably neglect the neighbors we are bidden to serve. What we’re to do is care for one another. We report to God by caring for one another, and God reports to us through others’ care for us. That’s the business plan.

Jesus was human, and yet God worked holy miracles of healing through him. Once and for all, God gave us the formula. We are no longer to wait for anointed prophets. Each of us has the power of prophecy. Each of us has the power of healing, if only we can feel Christ’s love flowing

through us, and perceive God's embrace within and beyond those whom we serve. Like a fire hydrant: the water comes from the river, flows through us, and everyone on the block gets wet.

Here is Martin Luther's expression of the paradox: "A Christian is a perfectly free Lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

Says Moses: "The ones who speak falsely (and they're hard to spot) in the name of other gods, and the ones who speak ungodly words in YHWH's name (they're even harder to spot), they will all surely die."

But we believe the ones who speak in the name of Christ -- with authority! -- and by them, ohhh the demons that will be cast out and flee, shouting, "What have you to do with us, you holy ones of God?!?!" And then they will be silent.

The wisdom of the ancestors is indeed in the similes. Let us go forth and make like the Kingdom of God.