

The Wise and The Wealthy -- Pent+12B

Wisdom has built her house, prepared her food, mixed her wine, and set her table. To those without sense she says, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live. Walk in the way of insight." The Proverbs are in the voice of Wisdom, aka God, but wait, what's this, a female deity? Returning from Michigan a couple weeks ago, we landed at LAX early in the day and scooted over to the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit at that big beautiful endless Science Center down there next to the Coliseum. Containing not just pieces of the manuscripts themselves, the show is a thorough and fascinating description of human activity culminating in the Ancient Near Eastern society that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls: that produced Modern Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In other words, it is an overview of human culture in what we call the Holy Land and the Middle East, Mesopotamia, the Cradle of Civilization. We modern folk might add, "from a religious perspective," but up until a relatively short time ago, every perspective was a religious perspective, which one just depended on which deities had the most power and glory at the mo.

One display case contained a few dozen of the hundreds of figurines of the goddess Asherah or Astarte found in Palestine. She was the deity who accompanied the Baals and Moloch's and Yahweh's of this world. It seems God was female too before she was only male. Officials and their followers around Jerusalem and the Great Temple became aware of and attached to a single paternal deity long before the common folk, who continued their allegiance to female gods until a combination of illegalization, displacement and

the passage of time made them scarce. The people didn't want a god who was many days journey away and under the control of who-knows what powermongers; they wanted gods who would give very present help in any kind of trouble, who would not suffer their feet to be moved, who would neither slumber nor sleep nor be restricted to Jerusalem.

Speaking of Coliseums: In other archaeological news, they're restoring the Emperor Nero's palace in Rome. In July of the year '64 – not our '64, mind you, the one with The Beatles, Cassius Clay, the War on Poverty, the first Ford Mustang and the first Surgeon General's smoking warning -- in '64 CE (or AD, from a religious perspective) a catastrophic fire burned large areas of Rome to the ground. In the fire's aftermath, an enormous section of the city was commandeered by Nero for his personal use. The palace he built had its own artificial lake and hundreds of rooms, some with 36' ceilings and little perfume spritzers mounted above to keep everybody fresh. Clearly this was not the house that Wisdom built. Majestic and glorious, maybe, but not having been built on anything but violence and injustice, it could hardly stand firm forever. Four years was more like it. Nero was so horrible that his immediate successors razed a big part of the palace and eventually built a stadium there that came to be known as The Coliseum because of the gigantic statue of Nero that used to be there even though most people hated him. The Romans could be a little vain at times, even about their villains. The rest of the palace was filled in with dirt, which they're now removing so we moderns can look with amazement upon what he perpetrated.

Nero was always a man desperate to be popular, so he had to find a scapegoat to blame the fire on. The perfect target was an obscure new religious sect, the Christians. So, many Christians were arrested and crucified, burned or thrown to wild animals in the circus. It is this brutal persecution that immortalized Nero as the *first Antichrist* in the eyes of the Christian Church. Sounds like he deserved it. The *second Antichrist*, on the other hand, is a little harder to guess. Anybody? Martin Luther, by edict of Church. Indeed, with every perspective being a religious one, it most certainly does depend on how much power and/or glory you have at the moment. This year's guy in a loincloth scampering around the circus ring being chased by a lion, could be next year's berobed Grand High Inquisitor, give or take a few generations. What's worse, a brutal dictator who says he's going to persecute you and does, or a brutal regime of so-called holy men who say they're going to save your soul and persecute and torture you instead? Humanity continues to produce both of these, in grisly variety.

All human relationships operate according to various economies. These economies are based on various currencies. For those subject to Nero's reign, the economy was one of pure physical power: he had it, they didn't. The main currency was violence: do what I say or I will destroy you. This is the situation that prevailed during persecutions of Christians then. Subsequently it has been the situation during persecutions by Christians too. Violent physical power masquerading as spiritual power. It is the situation in many places in the World today.

Contrast this with the economy at work when physical power is deprioritized in favor of spiritual power. The

goddess figurines, for example, did not afford their owners any leg up in the marketplace, nor did they emit a high-pitched signal capable of neutralizing an invading force. They simply reminded their owners of the blessed assurance faith offers, a very present help in trouble, steady companionship along the way and stability in the face of all life affords and inflicts. This is the kind of power that the goddess represents, that Wisdom represents, that Jesus represents. In this economy, described in our readings today from the Proverbs and exhorted by Paul to the Ephesians, maturity, wisdom and peace are the highest values instead of wealth, prestige and the dominion: “Lay aside immaturity, and live. Walk in the way of insight.” “Be careful how you live, not as unwise people but as wise.” In this economy, the currencies that have the most buying power are humility, forbearance, lovingkindness and charity, the opposites of worldly power and wealth.

“Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed,” exhorts Wisdom. “Do not get drunk with wine,” warns Paul, “for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing your spiritual songs.” In other words, have a very good time, but don’t get carried away. And Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. The one who eats this bread will live forever.” In the Bible wine is often used to represent what is most desired and valued in this life, a symbol of God’s wisdom and coming reign. Here too, Jesus is the symbol himself: flesh and blood that embody the spiritual currency of which Wisdom speaks:

“Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live. Walk in the way of insight.”

Maturity is the continual assessment of what currency we’re using in our relationships, and continual prayer to align ourselves with God’s spiritual economy. Notes Richard Foster, “Each activity of daily life in which we stretch ourselves on behalf of others is a prayer of action—the times when we scrimp and save in order to get the children something special; the times when we share our car with others on rainy mornings, leaving early to get them to work on time; the times when we keep up correspondence with friends or answer one last telephone call when we are dead tired at night. These times and many more like them are lived prayer.”

The practice of lovingkindness must find its roots deep within us. Wayne Muller tells the story of how Mohandas Gandhi once settled in a new village. At once he began serving the needs of the villagers who lived there. A friend inquired if his objective in serving the poor was purely humanitarian. Gandhi replied, “Not at all. I am here to serve no one else but myself, to find my own self-realization through service to these village folk.”

It is with wisdom that Gandhi points out: even as we serve others we are working on ourselves; every act, every word, every gesture of genuine compassion naturally feeds our own hearts too. It is not a question of who is healed first. When we attend to ourselves with compassion and mercy, more healing is made available for others, and when we serve others with an open and generous heart, great healing comes to us.