

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Psalm 111; John 6:51-58; Ephesians 5:15-20

I Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14. “Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David. The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David, and his kingdom was firmly established” (2:10-12).

This is the great transition passage in I Kings. David died after reigning as Israel’s monarch for 40 years – seven in Hebron and 33 in Jerusalem. In other words, the text tells us that David was king of the two southern tribes that later made up the kingdom of Judah (Hebron) for seven years, and then continued as king of those two tribes while also reigning as king of the ten northern tribes that would later make up the kingdom of Israel (Jerusalem). It is worth noting that the division in Israel that would later manifest itself in the creation of two distinct kingdoms (930-722 BCE) already existed from the very origins of David’s reign. It was the strength of both David’s and Solomon’s personalities that held these two factions together into one nation; but once neither of them were on the throne, the natural antipathy between the ten northern tribes and two southern tribes expressed itself in rebellion and in the creation of two distinct kingdoms, thus destroying both the Israelite empire and the Hebrews’ domination of Palestine. It is further worth noting that the rebellion that David did face, led by his son Absalom, was the ten northern tribes attempting to pull out of the empire.

The text tells us that “Solomon’s kingdom was firmly established”. This is an indication that the force of both David’s and Solomon’s personalities were such that at David’s death, the empire held together and did not divide down those traditionally antagonistic lines. The formerly rebellious ten northern tribes had accepted Solomon as their legitimate king, as well as had the two southern tribes. Thus, the empire continued. It would not continue to hold together under Solomon’s foolish successor (and son), Rehoboam.

“Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places” (3:3). This passage sends a mixed message to the reader. It first tells us that Solomon loved Yahweh and obeyed the Law. But it also informs us that he “sacrificed and offered incense at the high places”.

The “high places” were sanctuaries for the worship of both Yahweh and of Canaanite gods that were on mountains or on hilltops (the “groves” were sanctuaries in forest glens). Until Yahweh worship was centralized in the Temple in Jerusalem during Solomon’s reign, there were designated “high places” in which Yahweh was worshipped. Chief among these was Gibeon (vs. 4), where the tabernacle was located that had traveled with Israel during the wilderness wanderings, along with its ancient bronze altar (I Chron. 21:29; II Chron. 1:2-6). However, the Ark of the Covenant, the principal shrine of Yahweh worship, was in Jerusalem where David had brought it, and David had worshipped before the Ark, not at Gibeon. Once the Temple was built in Jerusalem, Yahweh worship officially transferred from Gibeon, Shiloh and the other Israelite high places to Jerusalem.

Given the fact that, at this place in the story, Solomon had not yet built the Temple and worship had not officially transferred to Jerusalem, why does the author state, “only (Solomon) sacrificed and offered incense at the high places”? Wouldn’t that be the case for any Israelite? Why make special note of it in regards to Solomon? The key to this mystery lies, I believe, in the word “only”. It is an indication where Solomon’s heart lay.

Some of the high places were designated sites for the worship of Yahweh. But most of the high places and groves were actually dedicated to the worship of Canaanite, Philistine, and Syrian deities. And these deities were nature gods, not gods of history as was Yahweh. They were worshipped by both Jews and Canaanites returning from the city to nature (“high places” on mountains, and “groves” in the forests), there to worship the gods through cult prostitution and human sacrifice. We know that, even after he had established the Temple, Solomon did not give up his worship at the high places (11:1-13). This emphasis by the author of the book of I Kings, therefore, is suggesting that Solomon’s worship in the high places, *even at the beginning of his reign*, was not so much the worship of Yahweh as it was participation in the cultic practices of the pagan gods. Thus, he “loved Yahweh”, in that he strictly obeyed “the statutes” and carried them out in public life. But his proclivity was toward the excesses of heathen worship.

Solomon begins his reign practicing politics as God intended them to be practiced – a concern for justice being done, seeking to wisely discern the right from the wrong and compassion for the people. However, over the years, he increasingly became concerned with accumulating wealth and power for himself and the monarchy (9:15-28), and that in turn, undermined his wisdom and his practice of justice. The first sign of his corruptible nature by power and wealth is the twist the author puts on his worship at the “high places” in 3:3, thus implying that his tendency toward synchronicity expressed itself even at the very beginning of his reign. And a receptivity both on Solomon’s part and his wives’ parts would evolve into a receptivity to the Canaanite propensity toward a politics of unilateral power and oppression and an economics of greed and exploitation that was compatible with the priorities and beliefs embraced by the worshippers of those gods.

3:5-14 is the well-known story of Solomon’s dream in which Yahweh appears to him and offers him the fulfillment of one wish. Solomon’s wish is for wisdom to adjudicate over the empire he has inherited from David. He does not ask for that which most oriental despots would request: long life, wealth or the death of their enemies. God, pleased by Solomon’s choice, grants him wisdom but also grants him what he did not ask for: long life, wealth, and freedom from enemy incursion.

Thus, Solomon demonstrates in his reign, sagacity for decision-making, the ability to listen in order to learn, and discernment between good and evil. He is a wise king. But he is also a fallible king, tempted by wealth, power and the defeat of his enemies. Therefore, the author of I Kings is careful to have Yahweh say at the account of the dream, “If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life” (3:14). The three unrequested wishes – long life, wealth, dominance of enemies – while given by God, are made contingent upon Solomon’s faithfulness to God and Israel, not his wisdom. But the author of I Kings later shows us that Solomon failed that contingency (11:1-13).

Psalm 111 is a hymn of praise for God's wonderful works. But rather than these "works" being described historically (e.g., "he rescued us from Egypt") or in nature (e.g., "he made the hills and valleys for the antelope and the oxen"), the author describes God's work conceptually. This is most unusual because if anything is true of Hebrew poetry, it is that it is most earthy and specific.

The psalmist writes, "Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the Lord is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant. He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations" (vss. 2-6).

Thus, the author of Psalm 111 celebrates God's work among God's people by describing God's characteristics. That is, the author uses a description of God's work to describe God's character. Thus, God has acted justly, honorably, graciously and mercifully toward us. Those actions have told us that Yahweh is a just, honorable, gracious and merciful God. Then, having drawn that conclusion, the Psalmist ends the Psalm with these words:

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom! All those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever" (vs. 10)!

John 6:51-58 has Jesus declare, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh". The Judeans then disputed among themselves saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for 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. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

There is no Eucharistic moment at the Last Supper in John, as there is in the other three gospels. John's account of the Last Supper is dominated by the rite of the washing of the disciples' feet, not the institution of the Lord's Supper. But the absence of the institution of the Lord's Supper in John is not an indication that John has overlooked or ignored it. Rather, it moves through the warp-and-woof of the gospel, with its frequent references to Jesus as the "bread of life". "For John, all of Jesus' life, rather than one particular event at the end of his life, "institutes" the sacrament of the Eucharist. In the "I am" sayings of ch. 6 (vv. 35, 48, 51), Jesus says that he is the food that gives life, and it is through eating his flesh and drinking his blood (6:53-56) in the Eucharist that the believer is able to share fully in . . . Jesus' life".¹

¹ Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John", *The New Interpreters' Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 1920.

Bread and drink are essential for the sustaining of life. Here, Jesus is saying that he is sufficient bread and drink for his gathered alternative community. He is the new “manna”, even more miraculous than the manna given by God to Moses in the desert (6:32-34). Jesus is all-sufficient for the Christian and the Christian community. And that total sufficiency of Christ is captured in the celebration of the Eucharist, because it is only in this sacrament that Christ is profoundly broken and his blood shed for the redemption of the world (6:52-59). And, by definition, this healing sacrament, which connects us to Christ and communicates his all-sufficiency for us, can only be celebrated together – celebrated in community!

Ephesians 5:15-20 summarizes Paul’s modeling to Gentile Christians as to how Christians should act. He tells them to live as wise, reflective, focused people. Live to carry out God’s will – which is to bring all society into a shalom community of love, justice, and elimination of poverty. Center yourselves on worshipping God, Paul instructs, “giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 20).

Ephesians 5:15-20 is dominated by an emphasis on sobriety. Why is this? Why would Paul select as his most important characteristic of the Christian life as presented here to be “not (to) get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:18-20)?

The key to understanding this emphasis is Paul’s use of the Greek word, *asortia* (here translated “debauchery”). That Greek word literally means “excess” and connotes a charismatic-like state of ecstasy in worshipping pagan gods induced by drinking an excessive amount of wine.

The cult of Dionysus or Baachus was one of the most prominent cults in the Roman Empire. Bacchus was the god of wine. Worshippers would get drunk on wine, and then in their drunken states, would prophesy, dance and sing in a charismatic frenzy. Such worship was known as “asortia”, the very word Paul uses here in Ephesians 5.

Christians are to be filled, not with the excesses of Dionysian worship, but with the Holy Spirit. That “infilling” may evoke charismatic gifts in people and even ecstasy, but its source is different. That charism doesn’t come from drunkenness within the whipped-up enthusiasm of Dionysian worship. Rather, it comes as a gift of the Holy Spirit and must be used in the service and worship of God.

Worship is to be done by God’s people as their offering to God, Paul states here. But it is also addressed to “one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”. Thus worship both praises God and benefits each other, for it encourages, teaches and ministers to one another for mutual benefit (see I Cor. 14; Heb. 10:24).