

An Introduction to a Justice Reading of the Lectionary Scripture

by Robert C. Linthicum

This “electronic book” of Cycles A, B and C of a justice commentary on the lectionary, *The Gospel of Shalom* began as a challenge from the Board of Directors of Partners in Urban Transformation. In 2005, while I was still president of PIUT, one of our board members insisted at one of our meetings, “Linthicum, you have been working with scripture for 48 years from justice perspectives as well as spiritual. When are you going to begin sharing your research with the rest of the church?”

What did that board member mean by this challenge? Well, he was referring to an incident that began in my life on June 2, 1957 when I began an experience that would horrify me but would also radically alter my life and my ministry. Let me tell you about it.

In 1957, while I was a student in college, I was working among African-American teenagers in a government housing project in a major city of the United States. This housing project was built to warehouse the poor in high-rise buildings of poor construction and design. Our ministry among those youth included recreational and athletic activities that were designed to bring them to confession of Christ as Savior. Once they received Christ, they were encouraged to join our Bible studies where they would be disciplined and connected to the life of a local church.

One of the youth who began to actively participate in our Bible studies was a new Christian named Eva. Eva was an exceptionally beautiful teenager, physically mature for her age. She became even more radiant when she received Christ as her Lord and Savior. I began discipling Eva, building her up in the “nurture and admonition” of the Lord.

My academic year was drawing to a close and I was looking forward to returning home for summer vacation. Just before I was to leave my teenage “parish”, however, Eva came to me greatly troubled.

“Bob”, she said, “I am under terrible pressure and I don’t know what to do about it. There is a very powerful gang of men in this project that recruit girls to be prostitutes. They are trying to force me to join them. I know it’s wrong, but what should I do about it?”

I didn’t know what to say to Eva. Nothing in my experience had prepared me to deal with something like this! After all, I was only 19 years of age! The only thing I could think to do was to share with her what I had learned in Sunday school and in the Christian college I attended -- to “resist evil and it will flee from you”, to “commit your way unto the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart”. I urged her to stick with her Bible-study group and not to give in to the gang’s demands.

And then I left for my summer vacation!

Three months later, I returned to college and to that ministry. Eva had stopped attending the Bible study. When I asked about her at the Bible study, the other youth told me she had stopped coming about a month after I had left.

I feared the worst! I went to Eva's apartment in one of the project buildings to talk with her. Eva answered the door. When she saw that it was me, she burst into tears.

"They got to me, Bob," she said. "I've become one of their whores!"

"Eva, how could you give in?" I unsympathetically responded. "Why didn't you resist?"

"I did resist!" she replied. "I didn't give in; I was forced in." Then she told me a story of sheer intimidation and terror.

"First, they told me they would beat my father if I didn't become one of their whores. I refused -- and they beat him bad. Then they said my brother was to be next. I still refused, and he ended up in the hospital with both legs broken. Then they told me that if I didn't yield, they would gang rape my mother. I knew they meant it, and I couldn't allow that. So I gave in and became one of their whores."

"But Eva," I said, "Why did you let them intimidate you that way? Why didn't you get some protection? Why didn't you go to the police?"

"Bob, you honky," Eva responded in disgust, "Who do you think the gang is?"

Suddenly it hit me. This gang of "very powerful men" Eva was describing was that city's police! The police -- the very people entrusted with the task of protecting and defending the people -- were in reality the real exploiters and oppressors of the people. Here was evil like I had never known it before -- for the police were the gang operating the prostitution ring and recruiting young girls like Eva out of that slum. And later it was discovered that this was not simply a single police precinct gone astray. What was happening in that one precinct was the tip of the iceberg in what was a city-wide operation of gambling, prostitution, drug-distribution and bootleg liquor by the police, with the judiciary organized to legally protect from exposure and prosecution this betrayal of the people.¹

It was in this encounter in 1957 that I discovered two things. First, I realized that the power of the world's evil is far greater than the sins of its individuals. The very systems of a city or nation could become corrupt, grasping, oppressive and exploitive. And it little mattered even if all the Evas among that nation's poor were to be won to Christ as long as the evil in the systems could be allowed to run unchecked and destroy these Evas.

The other thing I realized was that my theology and the very way I read the Bible was inadequate for ministry in that kind of evil-dominated world. Through Eva's tragedy, I realized that if the church does not deal with the systems and structures of evil, then it will not be

¹ Robert Linthicum, *Transforming Power* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 20-22. Used by permission.

effective in transforming the lives of that city's individuals. What I needed, I realized, was two things: First, I needed a theology as big as the city itself, a biblical understanding that would be equal to the challenge of the social *and* individual sin of the world! Second, I needed a praxis, a system, a strategy that would be equal to the task of empowering both the poor and people of good will to work together to confront and change the systems and to empower the people to create their own corporate future. Over the years, I found the theology in a justice reading of scripture. And I found the praxis in the practice of community and broad-based organizing. That praxis I would discover ten years later – and have practiced organizing for empowerment ever since. But the theology I discovered came out of my ongoing work with scripture.

Faced with the shock of Eva's fate and how I had contributed to that fate because of my own naiveté, I did the only thing I knew as a Christian to do. I turned to scripture. And I began studying scripture in order to try to understand the kind of urban world in which I had been called to minister – what God's intentions were for the city and what kept going wrong that seemed to always be thwarting those good intentions. I turned to scripture to try to understand what the church was called to be and do in a world of such corporate and systemic greed, corruption and abuse of power. I studied scripture in order to understand what Christians like myself were called to be doing in the world and how we were expected to carry out those ministries. I examined scripture to understand how God would empower people to set their own corporate future and how to accomplish that future. And I allowed scripture to speak to me about how God would nurture and sustain each one of us caught up in the struggle through disciplines of personal spiritual formation, being sustained in community, absorbing into one's self and one's spiritual community God's very vision for the city, and to celebrate the spiritual discipline of simply "keeping on keeping on"!

I began this work with scripture in October of 1957. And I have been at it ever since. I set myself the discipline of spending at least one hour a day in biblical study and reflection, and have essentially been faithful to that discipline down through the decades (with some occasional "falling off the wagon"). I read other fellow travelers voraciously, and was informed and enlightened by them. But I also practiced my own discipline of personal biblical reflection, so that my research would come from my own struggles with scripture.

That research now fills 41 volumes of 3-ringed notebooks, the first decades all hand-written and occasionally typed, the last decade computer-generated. Some of this reflection found its way into my sermons as a pastor. Other material was used to create seminars, workshops and courses for pastors around the world as I taught for World Vision, PIUT and several graduate schools. Still other material became the foundation for several of my books (*The People Who Turned the World Upside Down; The People Who Met God; City of God, City of Satan; A Transformacao da Cidade; Transforming Power; Building A People of Power*). And much of it formed the base for the series of six DVD courses on equipping churches to transform their communities.²

² The six courses are: "The World as God Intended And as It Really Is" (5 sessions); "What Did Jesus Really Come to Do?" (4 sessions); "Building a Church of Power" (6 sessions); "Building Relational Power in Your Community" (4 sessions); "Using Power to Turn Your City Upside Down" (5 sessions); "How to Develop Powerful Leaders and Build Values" (3 sessions). Each session is 90 minutes long. All of my resources can be obtained from Urban Expression-North America, 3991 Madison St., Riverside CA 92504; (909) 816-2614; urban.anabaptist@gmail.com.

But although I have chosen selected scripture from my personal study for teaching and preaching, I have not published my study of the entirety of scripture. That is what that PIUT board member meant when he challenged me with the question, “When are you going to begin sharing your research with the rest of the church?”

Of course, his question generated solid discussion. We talked about whether that research should be shared and if so, how. But we also found ourselves gravitating increasingly toward the lectionary. *The Common Lectionary (Revised)*³ would provide a significant vehicle for using my biblical research for three reasons. First, it is used by the clergy of many churches to structure their preaching. Second, it takes an intentionally-comprehensive approach to scripture, examining on any given Sunday or Holy Day an Old Testament lesson, a Psalm, a Gospel lesson and an Epistle lesson. And third, it provides an effective vehicle to work with scripture corporately and from a justice orientation as well as an individualistic and pietistic perspective. So, before the day was out, the decision was made to use the lectionary to begin sharing with the Church Universal the biblical research I had been doing since 1957 in order to make sense out of the nonsense of ministering in a world both of social as well as personal evil and yet a world that God deeply loves.

Through 2009, the PIUT website was chosen as the vehicle to get out a weekly commentary on the lectionary’s scriptures to the church. I intentionally posted the commentary three weeks before each scripture’s intended use on a specific Sunday (or holy day) of the Christian Year. Later, it was moved to my personal website, www.rclinthicum.org. Now, commentary is posted on that site of every scripture in the entire lectionary, as well as important scripture not appearing in the lectionary (see ch. 6, “Truly Strategic Scripture Avoided by the Lectionary”).

Most of the commentaries on the lectionary scripture is my own work as I studied specific scripture from a social and justice perspective, both in English translations and in the original languages. But “no man is an island, entire of itself”, and this man has been significantly influenced by the writings, conversations and work with others who have also sought to make scripture relevant to the real world. I owe a debt of deep gratitude to those who have contributed insight to the empowering task, especially in three categories. First, I owe heart-felt thanks to those whose biblical work opened nuances of the scripture to me and upon whom I built my own biblical work. Chief among them would be Walter Brueggemann (a political reading of the Old Testament), Walter Wink (the principalities and powers), Ched Myers (the Gospel of Mark), Wes Howard-Brook (John), Joel Green and Donald Kravbill (Luke), Dale Bruner (Matthew), William Herzog II (the Parables), Albert Nolan, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Gustavo Gutierrez, J.L. Segundo, John Calvin and John Knox. Likewise, anyone who is truly familiar with the worlds of broad-based and community organizing and with base ecclesial communities cannot help but notice how much my thinking about building the power of the people has been influenced by reading, listening to and/or working with such formative figures as Saul Alinsky, Edward Chambers, Ernesto Cortes Jr., Michael Gecan, Rebecca Gifford, Ken Fujimoto, Mike Miller and Don Helder Camara. Finally, there are those brothers and sisters from around the world, whether with World Vision or with other empowerment efforts with

³ The Consultation on Common Texts, *The Common Lectionary (Revised)*, The book of Common Worship (Louisville, KY.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 1033-1048.

which Partners in Urban Transformation has worked, who have put biblical principles of people power to work in their communities. I am most appreciative of the shared work I have done with Rev. Ken Luscombe (Australia) and Dr. Rebecca Gifford (USA). I would include among these “saints of action” Dr. Stephen Githumbi (Kenya), Marilyn Stranske (USA), Franklin Joseph (India), Michael Eastman (Great Britain), Dr. Osborne Joda-Mbewe (Malawi), Stan and Nancy Moore (USA); Fr. Ben Beltran (the Philippines), Lawrence Mangalarajan (India), Mrs. Dana Carpenter (USA), Rev. David Ashiko (Kenya), Remedios Geraldo (Philippines), Derek and Lisa Engdahl (USA); Darci Dusilek (Brazil), Brian Heymans (South Africa), Jose and Leoni Almada-de-Abreu (Brazil), Bree and Tom Hsieh (USA); Bwalya Melu (Zambia), Max Chigwida (Zimbabwe), Julie and Mike Fronk (USA) and Paul Abbott (Mauritania). They all put theory on the ground and made it work – and people’s communities were transformed!

To all these people, I owe a great debt of gratitude. Without their contributions – whether done knowingly or unknowingly – *The Gospel of Shalom* would not have happened. And my life would have been much the poorer.

May God richly bless you, dear reader, as you share with me in working with the lectionary scripture!