

What is a Justice Reading of the Lectionary Scripture?

by Robert C. Linthicum

“Why wasn’t I taught in seminary to read the Bible this way?” The pastor who angrily spoke those words to me was a Presbyterian pastor in Malawi, East Africa in 1987. I was at that time the director of World Vision International’s Urban Advance, which was working with World Vision field offices and communities of the poor throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America to call forth the innate powers lying in the people to take charge of their own destiny. I had been asked by the Malawi Council of Churches to give a day of lectures to 300 Malawian pastors on how to use the Bible to do a social analysis of the world as God intended it to be and the way it actually was. That analysis resulted in us then working with scripture on what the Church was called to be about in conforming the world to God’s intentions for it. I was weary from eight hours of teaching, but here was this angry pastor in my face.

“Why is this way of reading the Bible so important to you, pastor?” I responded.

“I went to a Presbyterian seminary here in Malawi,” my challenger told me. “And I was taught to read the Bible the white man’s way. It was helpful, but it was so very unAfrican!”

“What do you mean”? I inquired.

“What I mean is that we Africans center ourselves on our relationships with each other. Our primary concern is not the individual or even the family, but the community. We are a communal people. And we feel that all of life is spiritual – the act of conceiving a child, childbirth itself, becoming a man or a woman, marriage, building the economic life of the village, acting justly, growing old, facing death. All of life is spiritual. And my spirituality is enhanced by your spirituality, because we are an interdependent people.

The pastor continued. “But the Bible I was taught to read and believe within the mission school and seminary was taught to me by white missionaries, and they told me it was all about my personal salvation and gaining eternal life for myself – whether my village received it or not. And those white missionaries and professors were supposed to know much more about that Bible and Christianity than I know. So how could I argue with them?”

“So this is my dilemma. I embrace Jesus Christ and the Christian faith. But I also embrace who I am and who my people are as Africans. Now, in the light of the fact that my life as an African is all about the community and yet I’ve been taught that it ought to be about gaining my eternal salvation, whether my community receives it or not – do I have to give up being an African in order to be a Christian? Or do I give up my Christianity in order to be truly African? That has always been my dilemma.”

Then this pastor concluded. “Now, today, you have given me a different way of reading the Bible. And I have discovered that the Bible is all about the very things my village and my people are concerned – what God wants my village as well as my church to be about, how we

should live being just toward one another, how we should share our wealth so that no one goes hungry, and how God comes into relationship with us through Jesus. You have made me an African again – and yet you have preserved my Christian faith!”

I felt like I was going to cry with joy! God had given me the privilege to be good news to this African pastor. But he was far more grace to me. He had reminded me of the importance of the work I was doing -- of equipping people how to read the Bible, not simply as a history book, not simply as great literature, not even as a book of spiritual instruction, but rather as that book that always has the potential to become God’s Word to us that transforms our entire world (political, economic, social, spiritual, individual, corporate, cosmic) and ourselves into the people God has intended us to be. And it can transform our entire world, because it is that entire world (political, economic, social, spiritual, individual, corporate, cosmic) with which the Bible deals!

“Why wasn’t I taught in seminary to read the Bible this way?” Over the years since that initial encounter, I have heard this sentiment expressed over and over again – and invariably by very angry pastors! The way we have been taught to read the Bible and, consequently, the way we now teach the Bible to others is woefully inadequate in confronting the world in which we now live – and that is because we have not been taught to read the Bible politically. If Christianity is to survive the 21st century, it will only happen by the proclamation of a whole gospel to a whole world -- the totality of world issues and concerns. And that cannot happen as long as we see the Bible solely about individual and personal salvation. It is about that! But it is about far more than that! The Church at the beginning of the 21st century desperately needs to learn how to read the Bible from a justice perspective. And that begins with the very scriptures we publicly read in worship and on which we preach. It must begin with the lectionary.