

more") is insidious and results in idolatry (see Col. 3:5). Furthermore, life is more than possessions. As a divine gift, it is valued in other ways than by the size of bank accounts and stock portfolios.

The parable is powerful and needs little explanation. It pushes the whole issue of possessions a step farther by depicting the tragedy of trusting in false security. The rich fool is not guilty of greed; his acreage simply produces a bumper crop. His problem is the misguided illusion that his prosperity has secured the future. He feels amply supplied "for many years." But then in the midst of a conversation he is having with himself, God interrupts to inform him that death is on its way. One whose whole speech has been delivered in the first person ("I will do this and that") is left with the rhetorical question, "And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

Now the text does not prescribe specific answers to our questions about possessions. It does not provide rules that define how much is "enough" and what people should do with their wealth if they have some. The reader hunts in vain for a guideline, a principle, a quantifiable definition of greed that will tell one whether he or she has stepped over the line. The text does not offer a new law, but it does confront the reader with eloquent language and powerful symbols that continue to prod the imagination. To be constantly on guard against greed, to be reminded that life is a gift of God and not a hard-earned acquisition, to be warned vividly against the presumption that affluence can secure the future—these are more than rules.

PROPER 14

Ordinary Time 19

*Sunday between
August 7 and 13 inclusive*

Both the lesson from Isa. 1 and the selection from Ps. 50 call the people of God to "Hear!" (Isa. 1:10; Ps. 50:7). In each case, the message has to do with sacrifices and burnt offerings: God does not want them! This apparent rejection of one of the hallmarks of Israel's liturgical life should not be interpreted as an outright rejection of worship. Rather, it seems that the sacrificial system had come to be understood as a means of attempting to manipulate God for self-centered purposes, and the texts therefore call for worship that is God-centered (Ps. 50:14–15, 23) and prepares the worshiper to enact God's will (Isa. 1:16–17). Both texts conclude with a promise and a warning, thus emphasizing the importance of the decision involved to honor God and God's purposes rather than self (Isa. 1:18–20; Ps. 50:22–23).

The Gospel lesson also calls the people of God to decision. As in Isa. 1 and Ps. 50, this call to decision is based on the good news that God rules the world and offers people a share in this reign (Luke 12:32; see Isa. 1:2–3; Ps. 50:1–6). Unlike the rich man who trusts only himself and acts only in his own self-interest (Luke 12:16–21), the people of God are invited to "sell . . . and give" as a sign of their trust in God and God's reign (Luke 12:33–34). The juxtaposition of vs. 32–34 with the call to "be dressed . . . be ready" (vs. 35, 40) suggests that our use of financial resources is inextricably related to our conviction that the future and our destiny lie ultimately with God. What we believe about the future affects how we live in the present.

This affirmation is precisely the message of Heb. 11. The entrusting of one's life and future to God is "the reality of things hoped for, the proof of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1; for this translation, see the commentary on the Epistle lection for this Sunday). There is no better example of this affirmation than the story of Abraham and Sarah (Heb. 11:8–16). The message of the four lessons may be

summed up by Heb. 11:16: For those whose trust in God's reign 'makes possible lives lived for God and for others, "God is not ashamed to be called their God."

Isaiah 1:1, 10–20

Important passages from Israel's preexilic prophets constitute the Old Testament lections for this period of Year C, a series that now turns its attention for two Sundays to Isaiah of Jerusalem. A number of scholars hold the view that the material in Isa. 1–39 has been grouped in a roughly chronological fashion (Isa. 40–66 is considered to reflect the activity of later prophets in the Isaian tradition). If that is so, the present text may date from near the beginning of Isaiah's ministry, or about 742 B.C. (see Isa. 6:1). Many texts attributed both to "early" Isaiah and "early" Jeremiah have close parallels with the work of Amos and Hosea, their Northern predecessors, and Isa. 1:10–20 is no exception. (Isaiah 1:1 is included in this day's lection as a means of introducing vs. 10–20.) It does not strain the imagination to assume that just as, let us say, young Beethoven relied heavily on Mozart for models in musical composition, young (if young they were) Isaiah and Jeremiah looked in similar fashion to Amos and Hosea. (And for Jeremiah, Isaiah would have been a model.) Isaiah 1:10–20 has especially close affinities to Amos 5:21–24 and Hos. 6:6 (compare Micah 6:6–8).

Each of these texts contains the same basic message: worship is an idle exercise unless it brings about a changed heart within the worshiper. Burnt offerings (v. 11) and special high holy days (v. 13) mean nothing unless the worshiper lives a life of goodness and justice (v. 17). That much seems clear, but what is less clear is the prophet's basic attitude toward worship as such. It is one thing to say that worship finds its ultimate meaning in the changed lives of the worshipers, but quite another to say that worship, instead of offering assistance in a life-changing experience, actually acts as an impediment. Yet one can read this text from Isa. 1, as well as similar texts from Amos and Hosea, in such a manner that this is precisely what they seem to say. Thus it may be that, instead of calling for a renewed worship, one that brings about reoriented hearts, the prophets (some of them, at least) are calling for the abolition of worship altogether. Their reason: formal worship prevents the people of God from achieving their true calling—lives of justice and compassion.

Bringing offerings is futile.

.....
Even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen. (Isa. 1:13, 15)

Instead of worship, the people must

learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed (v. 17)

and so on.

Now if this was indeed the prophetic attitude toward worship, the Old Testament as a whole does not share it. Nor can the modern preacher. The simple reason is that, in the experience of the community of faith, worship, when rightly engaged, elevates the spirits of the faithful and reinvigorates women and men to pursue fresh acts of justice and compassion. Both Old and New Testaments affirm this reality (Ps. 150; Acts 16:25), as do the traditions of synagogue and church.

The challenge for the interpreter of this text is permit it to speak, not as a denial of worship, but as an affirmation of worship, worship that leads men and women of faith to lives characterized by those qualities enumerated in Isa. 1:17.

It goes without saying that this text is not a condemnation of Israelite or Jewish worship ("the blood of bulls," v. 11) in favor of Christian worship. While it is true that Christians would deny the value of certain acts of worship referred to here (as would devout Jews—although for different reasons), this passage should not be twisted so as to permit anti-Semitic innuendos.

Verses 18–20 offer words of hope in what seems an otherwise hopeless situation. The theological movement within the text is from outright condemnation (v. 10) to an offer of restoration (v. 18). The verb in "let us argue it out" comes from the language of the law court, and it refers to the kind of discourse that results in the disclosure of the truth (compare Job 23:7, where the same verb is used). That truth is this: Change is possible in the lives of women and men, change so complete that it may be compared to the transformation of red (a reference back to the blood of the sacrificed animals in v. 11?) into white. "If you are willing . . . ; but if you refuse . . ." set the options before each person. The choice of the one is life, of the other is death.

So the text, far from bringing us to a denial of worship altogether, reminds us of the urgency of *right* worship, a worship that understands that beauty and pageantry, loud noises, and good feelings are not of value in themselves. They are of value only as they help us to

cease to do evil,
 learn to do good;
 seek justice,
 rescue the oppressed,
 defend the orphan,
 plead for the widow.
 (Vs. 16–17)

Psalm 50:1–8, 22–23

Most psalms are songs or prayers, but Ps. 50 is neither. Many scholars label it “a prophetic exhortation,” but Erhard Gerstenberger more plainly calls it a “liturgical sermon” (*Psalms, Part 1*; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988, p. 210). To be sure, its accusatory tone does not accord very well with contemporary homiletical guidelines and techniques, but as Gerstenberger points out, “Accusatory and threatening rhetoric still today is part and parcel of many a Christian sermon” (p. 209). And, besides, Ps. 50 has much to commend it homiletically. For instance, the preacher—perhaps originally addressing a congregation in a postexilic synagogue—has exeged the congregation well. Two problems are detected and then addressed in the two parts of the sermon: (1) a misunderstanding of sacrifice (vs. 7–15); and (2) the failure of congregational members to practice what they preach (vs. 16–22). In short, the problem involves the congregation’s worship and its work. The two parts of the sermon are introduced by vs. 1–6, and v. 23 is a summary and conclusion.

As is fitting for an introduction, God is named three times in v. 1, starting with the old Canaanite name for the supreme deity and concluding with Israel’s personal name for God: “El, Elohim, Yahweh.” Verse 1 also introduces what Ps. 50 will predominantly involve—Yahweh’s speaking. In this case, Yahweh speaks to summon the earth; in v. 4, Yahweh will call to the heavens and the earth. They are to serve as bailiffs and perhaps witnesses as Yahweh puts the people on trial (see Deut. 32:1; Isa. 1:2; Micah 6:1–2, where the heavens and earth also serve as witnesses to God’s speaking or acting). Heaven and earth summon the people to court (v. 5). The

mention of “covenant . . . by sacrifice” recalls Ex. 24:1–8, where sacrifice accompanied the reading of “the book of the covenant” (24:7) following the giving of the Decalogue. At that point, the people promised, “We will be obedient.” But Ps. 50 suggests that God’s people have not been obedient, and so Yahweh is coming to “judge” (vs. 4, 6; the Hebrew words here differ but are essentially synonymous). Yahweh may “have been silent” in the past (v. 21), but will “not keep silence” any longer (v. 3).

As James L. Mays suggests, the “trial . . . proceedings can be seen only by the eye of faith” (*Psalms, Interpretation series*; Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1994). In other words, the trial scenario is the preacher’s rhetorical device for bringing the word of God to bear upon the congregation. The language of theophany in vs. 2–3 serves to assert Yahweh’s authority to speak and to judge. As in Deut. 33:2, Yahweh “comes” from a mountain residence and “shines forth” (see also Ps. 18:7–15). The storm imagery in Ps. 50:3 is reminiscent of God’s appearing on Sinai to establish the covenant and give the commandments to Moses and the people (Ex. 19, especially vs. 5–6, 8, 16, 18). The participation of heaven and earth also effectively points to Yahweh’s authority—Yahweh rules all things as well as all people. Not coincidentally, in another psalm where the heavens “declare . . . [God’s] righteousness” (97:6, NRSV “proclaim”), the context also contains the language of theophany (vs. 2–5) and the explicit affirmation, “The LORD is king!” (v. 1). In short, as sovereign of the universe, Yahweh has the authority to speak and act; and it is Yahweh’s intention to set things right.

The beginning of Yahweh’s direct address to the people in Ps. 50:7–15 is reminiscent of a key text from the book of Deuteronomy—the Shema, “Hear, O Israel” (Deut. 6:4). The Shema follows immediately upon Moses’ rehearsal of the Decalogue, and indeed the whole book of Deuteronomy has the purpose of covenant renewal as the people prepare to enter the land. Psalm 50 is also, in effect, a call for renewal of commitment. The particular issue involved in the first part of the sermon is raised in v. 8—the sacrificial system. Verses 8–15 should not be heard as a call to abolish the system, but rather to put sacrifice in proper perspective. The people were bringing their sacrificial offerings not out of gratitude to God, but rather as a means of asserting their own merit and self-sufficiency. It seems that they thought God needed them instead of their needing God. In response to this misunderstanding, God through the preacher proclaims that the proper sacrifice is “thanksgiving” (v. 14; see NRSV note). The proper approach to God begins with gratitude. Verse 15 reinforces the message. The people have been using worship as a means of

glorifying themselves. In vs. 8–15, God calls the people instead to “glorify me” (v. 15).

In spite of the NRSV translation of v. 16a, the “wicked” should not be understood as a different group. That is, vs. 16–22 are still addressed to the same congregation. The focus is now on the people’s work or behavior, and the problem is hypocrisy. They say the right things (v. 16), but they do not act in accordance with their covenant identity (v. 17). Verses 18–21 illustrate how the people break the commandments—stealing, adultery, bearing false witness (see Ex. 20:14–16; Jer. 7:9–10; Hos. 4:1–3). As Ps. 50:3 has already suggested, God breaks the divine silence and indicts the people for their faithlessness (v. 21). The fundamental problem is that they have forgotten God. Unless they “understand this” (NRSV “mark this”), the results will certainly be destructive.

Verse 23 summarizes the two sections and declares the good news. God’s will is to save, and God will “show . . . salvation” to those who can forget themselves long enough to understand their neediness and insufficiency. Verse 23a summarizes the message of vs. 7–15 (see especially vs. 14–15), and v. 23b summarizes vs. 16–22 (“way” suggests behavior or lifestyle).

Like all good sermons, Ps. 50 challenges the hearers to decide. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount presented the same call to decision: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). So did the apostle Paul; his dual appeal to the Romans corresponds to the two parts of the sermon in Ps. 50: (1) “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (12:1); and (2) “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God” (12:2). The decision is ours as well: Will we live to gratify ourselves? Or will we live in gratitude to God?

Hebrews 11:1–3, 8–16

This lection consists of the familiar opening lines from the recital in Hebrews of the faith of Israel’s ancestors, together with a significant sample from that recital, namely, the section regarding Abraham and Sarah. If time permits reading the chapter as a whole in the context of worship, the full impact of this history of faithfulness will be heightened.

That Heb. 11 is a single and coherent unit is clear. Chapter 10

concludes with a reminder that believers are “among those who have faith and so are saved,” providing a smooth transition into this discussion of the faith of Israel. The chapter itself both begins by looking back to “our ancestors” and concludes by connecting their experience to that of Christians. Rhetorically, the chapter serves two purposes: as encomium it praises the faithfulness of the past generations (see the more extended account in Sir. 44:1–50:21), and as exhortation it implicitly urges that same faith on present believers.

The NRSV’s translation of Heb. 11:1 is familiar but highly problematic, because two of the crucial words in this verse are exceedingly difficult to translate in this context. The writer defines faith as the “*hypostasis* of things hoped for,” which NRSV translates as “assurance,” giving the word something of a psychological connotation. Whatever *hypostasis* means, however, it almost certainly does not refer to an individual’s certainty or assurance. Ascertaining what is conveyed here is complicated by the fact that Hebrews uses it in different ways earlier in the book. In Heb. 1:3, the same word appears with its customary philosophical overtones (“He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being [*hypostasis*]”). In 3:14 it appears to have ethical connotations, specifically regarding steadfast Christian behavior (“For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence [*hypostasis*] firm to the end”).

Harold Attridge persuasively argues that the best translation of *hypostasis* in 11:1 is the philosophical one: faith is the “reality” of things hoped for (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989, pp. 308–10). By striking contrast with the customary understanding of this verse, in which it asserts the obvious truth that faith involves confidence about things that cannot presently be verified, what Hebrews actually asserts is that in faith the believer already anticipates the final outcome (the reality) of what is believed. That is not to say that believing makes something true or that whatever one actually believes will happen, but that faith itself has a kind of eschatological power.

Consistent with this translation, v. 1 goes on to affirm that faith is the “*elegchos* of things not seen.” Here again the NRSV is somewhat misleading, for *elegchos* does not mean conviction in the sense of personal, internal belief that something will happen. Instead, it normally refers to proof; faith is the “*proof* of things not seen” (emphasis added). What emerges from v. 1, then, is not a platitude about belief but a highly provocative claim that faith itself moves in the direction of the realization of those things that are presently beyond demonstration.

That astonishing claim begins to make sense in the recital of Israel's history that follows. Verse 2 anticipates that recital by introducing the "ancestors" whose stories will unfold in the chapter ahead. Verse 3 does not fit easily in the context, although it may connect to the issue of things that are presently not visible and those that will later become visible or known.

The discussion of Abraham's faithfulness has two foci: his obedience to the call to go to a new land and his confidence in God's promise of his own progeny. In verses 8-10, Abraham's (along with Isaac's and Jacob's) unsettled life in tents in land that had been promised to him is contrasted with the city he anticipated receiving. Earlier in Hebrews, the notion of "resting" in a settled place serves as a way of symbolizing the eschatological security and blessing anticipated by Christians (see 4:1-11). In 12:18-24, the "city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" also appears in a context that looks forward to the eschatological future.

In 11:11-12, Hebrews recalls Abraham's faith in God's promise regarding the children that would be born to him and Sarah. As the note on v. 11 in the NRSV indicates, some manuscripts identify Sarah as the subject of v. 11, which is surprising on two counts. First, that Sarah "received power to conceive," translated literally, imagines Sarah as the one responsible for conception, a notion that would be highly unusual in the ancient world. Second, the Hebrew Bible does not interpret Sarah as responding in faith but in amused skepticism. However this complex knot is unraveled, the presence of Sarah in the passage is consistent with later references to women in this chapter (see vs. 31, 35).

The point toward which this reminder about Abraham moves become clear in vs. 13-16. Like many others, Abraham died without having either of these promises realized. He did not inhabit the land promised him, and he did not live to see the large family promised him. Because he trusted God and looked forward to the fulfillment of God's promises, however, "God is not ashamed to be called their God" (v. 16). This is no grudging concession, but a strident affirmation: God is proud of Abraham and others who trust in God!

Luke 12:32-40

The Gospel lesson for last Sunday (Proper 13) came from a critical chapter in Luke's narrative, dealing with the devastating effects of wealth. It issued pointed warnings against greed and the presumption that by material possessions one can secure the future. The

lection for Proper 14 continues the instruction about possessions, this time setting the issue in an eschatological context and offering more specific guidance about how one can act responsibly.

First, a word about the literary structure of the section. Following the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21), Jesus tells the disciples not to become preoccupied with even the basic necessities of life—food and clothing. Their one concern is to pursue zealously God's rule and to be assured that God will care for them. If God can feed the ravens and clothe the fields with lovely lilies, then God will not ignore their need for life's essentials. These are words of comfort for disciples who will be called to risk a lot for the kingdom (12:22-34).

The concluding paragraph of this counsel to avoid anxiety (vs. 32-34) is assigned as the starting point for today's lesson and is coupled with the next section, including Jesus' words about being prepared for the coming Son of man (vs. 35-40). The linkage between directions about possessions and calls for preparedness for the return of Jesus at an unexpected time presents a dynamic context for reflection.

Three dimensions of the text can guide our considerations about possessions. First, the presupposition for any talk about what to do with wealth is the reality of God's reign. Paradoxically, disciples are told to *strive* for the divine kingdom (v. 31) and at the same time to be comforted that God is delighted to *give* them the kingdom (v. 32). The striving is set over against the temptation to strive for food and clothes. The giving reassures them that the world is controlled not by fate or by the demonic forces of disorder and confusion, but by a caring parent ("your Father"), whose kindly gift is to the "little flock."

Whose rule prevails in the world makes a great difference when one begins to think about possessions. If one believes that the divine reign has begun with the advent of Jesus, and the present is oriented to the completion of that reign in Jesus' return, then one has reason to bring God into any discussion about money. If, however, what makes the world go round is chance or human aggressiveness or a demonic force, then Jesus' words make little sense. The presence of God's rule is the only justifiable reason for a carefree attitude toward life's necessities and a willingness to share one's possessions with the poor.

Second, in light of God's gift of the divine rule, disciples are told to sell their possessions and give to the poor. They are beginning to discover what the rich fool should have done with his abundant crops. Instead of deluding himself into thinking that his prosperity guaranteed his future, he could have eased the immediate burdens of those whose crops had been devastated by drought.

Furthermore, there is a clear affirmation that taking a carefree stance toward one's personal needs and giving alms to the poor result in heavenly treasure. A reward is promised, but one that demands rejection of the strategy of the rich fool and his ilk, "who store up treasures for themselves" (12:21). To be sure, the pursuit of wealth has its rewards, but they are ephemeral, fleeting, and at the mercy of the acquisitiveness of others more greedy, in contrast to purses "that do not wear out" and treasures "unfailing."

The theme of almsgiving is, of course, persistent in Luke (14:33; 18:22) and paves the way for the picture of the ideal community in Acts 2:45; 4:34–37, where a regularized program of caring for the needy is instituted. The Christian community cannot contemplate the meaning of discipleship apart from considering how it will serve the poor and less fortunate. It lies at the heart of faithfulness.

Third, the section Luke 12:35–40 talks about perpetual readiness for the Son of man, adding a new dimension to the importance of almsgiving. The initial vignette depicts a master returning from a wedding feast and finding alert servants, immediately opening the door on his arrival. The master is so delighted at their watchfulness that he exchanges roles with them and, like another master (*kyrios*) we know, becomes their servant (see 22:27). The second vignette describes an unfortunate homeowner whose house has been broken into. Had he known when the thief was coming, he would certainly have been prepared for him.

All life is lived in expectation of the Son of man's return. The time of the arrival is unknown, but the coming is sure. This eschatological anticipation sets the talk about possessions in a new context. One's attitude toward wealth and its enticements and one's actions with the money he or she has are not trivial matters. They are part of the disciple's readiness and watchfulness.

PROPER 15

Ordinary Time 20

Sunday between
August 14 and 20 inclusive

Isaiah 5:1–7 and Ps. 80:8–19 employ similar images to represent the people of God—a vine or a vineyard. The image clearly communicates the careful commitment that God shows to God's people. Unfortunately, the people do not respond in kind (see Isa. 5:7), so God must destroy the vineyard (Isa. 5:5–6; Ps. 80:12–13). In Isa. 5:1–7, the judgment is announced. In Ps. 80, it has already occurred, and the people plead for restoration (vs. 1, 3, 7, 14, 19). As suggested in this Sunday's Psalm comments, on the basis of Ps. 80:14 the future life of God's people will depend not on their repentance, but rather on *God's* repentance!

An important canonical insight is achieved when this remarkable conclusion is heard in juxtaposition with Jesus' radical call for human repentance in Luke 12:49–56—namely, while God demands obedience and calls humanity to repentance, it is ultimately God who will bear the burden of human disobedience and whose gracious turning to humankind makes life possible. The clearest sign of God's gracious turning is the cross of Jesus Christ. It is also the cross that indicates the radical demand that repentance and discipleship involve, suggesting why repentance is so difficult and why faithfulness so rarely characterizes the life of God's people (see Luke 12:51–53).

Nevertheless, Heb. 11 demonstrates that the story of God's people does contain outstanding episodes and exemplars of faith, and Heb. 12:1–2 suggests that God never gives up on calling us to follow, to run the difficult race that leads to life. There is nothing easy about the course we are called to follow, and great perseverance is required (12:1). The good news, however, is that God does not ask us to go anywhere that God has not already gone in Jesus Christ, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (12:2).