

Lent III (C)  
*Isaiah 55.1-9; I Corinthians 10.1-13; Luke 13.1-9*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
11 March 2007

**“THE DIVINE ECONOMY”**

~Paul H. Friesen~

‘Ho!’ So begins our first Bible reading today. What is this word doing smack dab in the middle of the prophet Isaiah? And what are we supposed to do with it?

In English the word has meant many things over the centuries. It has meant ‘halt’ for a sword-swinging knight. And it has meant nothing really as the fake laugh of one of our Shopping Mall Santas. It can now mean worse in the mouth of some pop music idol—as a term of contempt for women.

But the Hebrew word uttered by the prophet Isaiah—the word translated by our English ‘Ho!’—usually caused our ancestors, the Jews, to shudder. On the lips of their prophets it almost always meant something like ‘Alas!’ or ‘Woe!’<sup>1</sup> Something awful, some terrible judgement, was about to be announced.

But not here. Isaiah wants his fellow exiles to pay attention, to ‘listen up’. Ho! God is speaking. God is near right now, he says a few words later. So take note. The news from God is good, but you must respond to it.

It seems a bit strange, then, that Isaiah presents his fellows with a riddle as soon as he has their attention. And this is the way the riddle goes:

Hey, if you’re thirsty, step right up. Don’t worry if you have no money. Buy drinks for free! Take all the wine and milk you want for your table. Don’t worry about the cost—there are no price tags.

Hey, why have you been buying imaginary food—you know, that fake bread? Why are you plunking down money for stuff that, when you eat it, leaves you hungrier than you were before?

Listen, says Isaiah, the only thing God can offer is gourmet food, and God only offers it for free. This is the way the divine economy works. Come to the party. Or put on your own dinner.

But whatever you do, eat for free, because if you pay you will only go away hungry. This is God’s economy, whatever any other economist might say. There is such a thing as a free lunch.

This brings us to the end of the second verse of today’s reading.

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<sup>1</sup> See John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p.435.

Now all those within earshot of Isaiah can't be blamed for wondering if this might be less than a helpful riddle, if perhaps it was all pure sarcasm. The prophets, after all, didn't hesitate to use sarcasm if they felt it would get their point across.

But it wasn't sarcasm this time. So twisted were the values of Isaiah's neighbours and so warped is our own age that Isaiah's words were almost bound to seem like nonsense the minute they were spoken and ever after.

We know, don't we, that if you're buying a carpet for the living room floor, you should save for a few years, because you get what you pay for. But we also know that money can't buy love and a whole lot of other things. Even the most brainless celebrity learns this from time to time—we know this from the celebrity magazines (which of course we only read because we are waiting in the grocery store line up!). But we know this truth by our own experience, though we have to keep learning it again and again.

The most important things can never be earned. This is the truth. It's not that nothing can be earned—it's just that the most important things cannot be earned.

What did the psalmist say—out of bitter experience perhaps? 'Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain...It is vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for [it is the Lord] who gives sleep to his beloved.'<sup>2</sup> It's not that we never have to work hard; it's not that these verses apply to some of us but not to others; but it's that we can't earn peace, or buy happiness, or the love of another.

So we're left with a really good Lenten question. Why do we think we can buy our way into the most important things and out of the deepest problems? For we try to buy things with all sorts of currency, not just money.

Why do we behave like that poor old fellow Sisyphus? Do you remember the myth of Sisyphus? He was punished for ... well, it's a long story and involved robbery, murder and betraying Zeus. As punishment he was given the impossible job of pushing a huge block of stone over the top of a large hill. He was doomed forever to return to the bottom and start over because he never quite made it to the top before the stone rolled down again.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Psalm 127.1-2*. Unless noted, all biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>3</sup> I thank John Oswalt for reminding me of the relevance of this myth: *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p.435. The story is retold in all its complexities by Robert Graves. See for instance *The Greek Myths* (London: The Folio Society, 1996), I:204-208.

But we're a bit like Sisyphus, aren't we. That is why we are caught in his myth. It's why we need to hear God say: 'my thoughts are not your thoughts.' Stop pushing the stone.

The divine economy isn't nonsense. It isn't illogical. We just keep forgetting the rules by which God works. 'I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast sure love,' said God to Isaiah. We might not be able to answer the question of why we keep forgetting this. But now is the moment to break the cycle, to let the stone roll to the bottom of the hill, to leave the hill, and to buy into God's bounty at no cost.

Isaiah takes us to a different place, from the doomed labours of Sisyphus. He takes us to the same place that Solomon takes us in his great poem on wisdom. '[Wisdom] has mixed her wine, she has also set her table. She has sent out her servant girls, she calls from the highest places in the town, "You that are simple, turn in here!" To those without sense she says, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed".'<sup>4</sup> God always begins by calling us to dine with him at divine expense.

This is the way God's economy works, whatever might happen on Wall Street or Bay Street or with our RRSPs, or with our parish portfolio.

And this is what St. Paul echoed in the Epistle. The Israelites, he said, 'ate the same spiritual food, and drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.' Their years in the wilderness made them realize that just as God was their creator, God was the one who actually fed them day by day. It's why we pray, 'give us this day our daily bread.'

It's not that God gives us spiritual bread, and that we're then responsible for earning our 'real' bread. The spiritual reality is always so great that it gathers up what we call 'real' or 'earthly' reality into its laws. It is God that gives us the will, the arms, the legs, the family, the society that feeds us at whatever stage we're at. We don't 'make ourselves'. That borders on idolatry.

Christians have long believed that St. Paul's words to the Corinthians applied to the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper. John Colet, 500 years ago, paraphrased this morning's Epistle this way: 'The Master of the Feast has opened all. He first in magnificent fashion piled the table high—through the ministry of Moses—with the covered dishes, and he was present there as the ruler of the banquet, but unseen. And afterwards he himself struck off the cover, offering himself, Truth itself, for the plentiful banqueting of his chosen guests.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Proverbs* 9.2-4.

<sup>5</sup> John Colet, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, ed. Bernard O'Kelly and Catherine A.L. Jarrott (Binghampton, New York: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Texts, 1985), p.217.

‘Afterwards’...Christ ‘was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary’. He lived and died and rose for humanity. Truth itself, Christ himself is what we offer at the Lord’s Table. And we don’t charge admission. And if we did charge an admission price to the Eucharist, we would rightly be condemned in the press, and visitors would rightly storm off in disgust.

But what happens after the ‘free lunch’? What happens after the Eucharist? What happens at the day’s end when we have eaten our dinner in our home out of God’s bounty around the world?

Isaiah says: ‘Seek the Lord while he may be found...let [us] return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on [us].’

St. Paul says, that though the Lord fed our ancestors in the wilderness, ‘nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them...we must not put Christ to the test.’

When we stand up after the Eucharist, when we rise from the dinner table, we are fit to share God’s bounty with our neighbour. We must share God’s bounty with our neighbour.

What about that tough little parable of Jesus we heard this morning, the one about the tree that risked being cut down?

St. Augustine can help us. He says, point-blank: ‘The tree is the human race.’ And he is clear that God, the Father, owns the estate and that Christ, the son, is the Gardener.

How is the tree to bear fruit? Because to bear fruit is part and parcel of the life of the healthy tree as it matures. The Gardner intercedes with the owner, or as Augustine puts in a lovely phrase, ‘The Merciful one intercedes with the Merciful one.’ And what does the Gardner say in the parable? ‘Let me work with the tree—let me fertilize it.’ How will this help, when it comes to the meaning of the parable? Let me quote Augustine directly: “Manure is a sign of humility. Let us apply a load of manure.”<sup>6</sup>

Though we forget to thank God for Christ in the Eucharist, and though we forget to thank God for our dinner, we respond when we are reminded. But do we really want to say to God, ‘Bring on the manure!’ No, and we really need not do it. But in the end the manure is a gift from God, as any farmer knows. The things that happen to us, that make us humble, are gifts from God too. That is why the church has long insisted that we confess our sins together, without exception.

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<sup>6</sup> In the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p.223.

Perhaps the very best question this Sunday in Lent is not: 'Why are we like Sisyphus: why do we keep doing the self-destructive things we sometimes do?' The very best question is this: What do we do when we depart after the Eucharist, when we get up from dinner, when we receive that gift of fertilizer? Because we were meant to bear fruit—we were meant to invite others to dine with us. We are fed by God's hand, so that we might feed others. This is how the divine economy works.