

Lent 3, Year C
Exodus and Luke
March 7, 2010

Last week I said that tone of voice was very important to understanding the meaning of the passage in Luke, and today I find myself having to say the same thing again about both the reading from Exodus and the one from Luke. For here we have the voice of God speaking in two very different ways; taken together they help us understand the relationship between the compassion and the judgment of God.

In the passage from Exodus God speaks with the voice of real compassion: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their suffering, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey..." I am painfully aware that this passage, and the narrative based upon it have been used by subsequent generations to justify displacing others from their ancestral homes. This speaks to the well established fact that people can and do abuse scripture. I want us to bracket that fact just now and concentrate upon the deeper issue, which is the expression of God's desire is to redeem these people, to deliver them from their slavery into a place of freedom. Here in Exodus is the voice of the One who loves determining to liberate the beloved.

It feels rather otherwise in the passage from St. Luke. In the face of two events, a horrible and murderous desecration on the one hand, and a terrible and fatal accident on the other, Jesus tells all the very religious and faithful people gathered around that the same fate was in store for them unless they repented. "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way that they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." Here is a really harsh judgment rendered upon those who claim to be the descendents of the very people God was moved in love and compassion to liberate from slavery in Egypt.

These two voices bring us face to face with a common issue in spirituality; how are we to understand our lives before God? Is God all compassion, all loving, always forgiving no matter what? Or is God always judging, always prepared to condemn those who by their thoughts or actions prove themselves incapable of accepting and living in the light of God's Word? One way of dealing with this issue is to resolve it by declaring that only one of those voices is authentic. Either God is all compassion, never condemning anyone for any reason or God is all judgment, quite willing to consign people who don't behave properly to hell. But obviously, God can't be both. People align themselves with one voice or another depending upon their politics and their spirituality. Another way of dealing with it is to say "that was then, this is now." The first generation was faithful, and got rewarded, the next one was faithless and got punished, which of course is a variation on the notion that God is judgmental.

Let me dispense with the latter variation quickly, perhaps too quickly. The record of the biblical narrative is clear; people are consistently faithless. Whether it was Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery, or David betraying Uriah the Hittite in order to get Bathsheba, or Jezebel worshipping with the priests of Baal or the injustices that preceded the exile, or, or, or, the entire narrative of the Hebrew Bible is that of a faithless people abandoning their God in any number of ways, and God always, sooner or later responding with redemptive and restoring love. The entire history of Christianity, I must modestly point out, is exactly the same; a faithless people ceaselessly bringing judgment upon themselves living in the presence of a Divine Life that as ceaselessly offers redemptive possibilities. So it is not that the first generation of Jewish people was more faithful and aware than any subsequent generation, and it is certainly not that Christians are more faithful and aware than Jews. What was then is now, and always has been.

But it is precisely this undeniable historical fact that enables us to see how to treat that first way of dealing with the dissonance created when laying the judgment and compassion of God side by side, as we have this morning. As important, it allows us to see the spirit in which God deals with our faithlessness. It is not at all that only one of those voices is authentic, which one depending upon the particular way your own spirituality tends. It is rather that both are authentic, are even more precisely, both together speak with the one voice of

God. In order to see this we need to understand that tone of voice, and motive which underlies it.

Sometimes we judge things simply in order to condemn them, to dismiss and rid ourselves of them. This is an absolutely awful sermon; it should never have been preached, and what was I thinking to imagine that anyone would be in the least bit interested? This is judgment that leads to condemnation and destruction. But sometimes we judge things from a different perspective and with a different tone of voice. Sometimes we judge things as deficient because we care enough about them that we want to improve them, make them better, indeed, we want them to become as good as they could possibly be, and whatever is happening now doesn't reach that standard. Judgment in those cases is an essential part of a developmental process that leads ever closer to perfection.

When my kids were growing up I was perfectly willing to let them get away with almost anything. Fortunately for them Beth was a better disciplinarian than I, so they got the kind of instruction they needed in order to develop as well rounded human beings. There was however one thing I would not let them do under any circumstances. I would not let them treat others poorly, and particularly I would not let them show any disrespect to people with less power than they had. Waitresses in restaurants, checkers in stores, poor people on the street, no matter what the situation I required them absolutely to treat people with less power than they had with respect and dignity. It was one

of the very few things I still believe I did right as a dad. When they did not do that, when they did not treat people with respect I got after them very hard not because I was ready to condemn them, to throw them out, but because I wanted them to grow into the fullness of their own humanity, and you can't do that without respecting the fullness of the humanity of other people. I judged them, most simply put, not because I now hated them for what they did, but because I loved them – and still do – for what they are, my very own children. This is judgment, but it is judgment that leads to growth, not judgment that leads to condemnation.

This is the only way I can understand my own life. When I experience genuine, justified, judgment – from whatever source it comes – (and as we know some discernment is necessary, for not all judgment is justified) I can interpret it only as the work of the God who loves me seeking my redemption from whatever destructive or self destructive path I am on. At times it is hard to tell, but judgment from God, mediated through people who love me, is for my own redemption, whether we understand that at the time or not. It is offered to make me better, to make me whole, for this is how God works. To refuse to offer such judgment when I am on a destructive or self destructive path is not an act of love, but rather it is an act either of indifference or cowardice. And I know this because I have been there at times, refusing to judge when judgment was required.

This is the point, and it is why we must understand that the judgment and the compassion of God go together; though they can be distinguished they can't finally be separated. Sometimes all that is needed is compassion, there is no doubt about that, but pure compassion without ever having any judgment will some of the time fool people into liking us, but it is not helpful and not redemptive. When the situation requires redemptive judgment, pure compassion without it is slothful, indifferent, cowardly. On the other hand, pure judgment without compassion is simply condemnatory, and becomes in short order self righteous, hateful, and destructive. I stand convinced that God's judgment on a fallen world is always motivated by love for us and for creation, and by a compassion born of that love. It is never simply decreed for our destruction, but rather is always for our redemption.

This is why we need to understand that judgment and compassion are not two different and irreconcilable voices, only one of which is authentically divine. Rather we must understand that where we see judgment offered with compassion, where its purpose is not our condemnation or destruction, but to move us closer to the life of redemptive love, there is the one voice of God, speaking, as our creed says "for us, and our salvation."