



November 12, 2017 - Trust or Complacency?

Given by Pastor Mattei

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

In Amos, people expect salvation: The people who wait for light will experience only darkness. They long for the Day of the Lord but the deliverance they have in mind is not the outcome of orthodox worship. The prophet must demolish false expectations so that his audience can recognize the gifts God has already given them and thereby come to participate more fully in the means of their salvation. Israelite faith in YHWH was rooted in YHWH's commitment to their safety: they commemorated YHWH's mighty works of old, and they continued to expect YHWH's aid in the future. The people eagerly await the coming of *their* (understanding of) God, the one who has saved (served?) them so many times in the past.

The story is told of a young minister sitting in her house on a Sunday afternoon who was disturbed by a frantic banging on the front door. Upon opening the door, she was confronted by a distraught member of her church. It was obvious that he was exhausted from running to her house and that he was on the verge of tears. "What's wrong?" asked the minister. "Please, can you help?" replied the man. "A kind and considerate family in the area is in great trouble. The husband recently lost his job, and the wife cannot work due to health problems. They have three young children to look after, and the man's mother lives with them as she is unwell and needs constant care. They are one day late with the rent, but despite the fact that they have lived there ten years with no problems and will likely have the money later in the week, the landlord is going to kick them all onto the street if they don't pay the full amount by the end of the day." "This is terrible," said the minister. "Of course we will help. I will go get some money

from the church fund to make up the shortfall. Anyway, how do you know them?" "Oh," replied the man, "I am the landlord."¹

How easily we disassociate our spiritual life from our practical life. We seem to construct a spiritual castle that gives us a semblance of goodness and truth about ourselves. In this castle we pile up all sorts of virtues we admire for the purpose of granting order and structure to our life and possibly to convince ourselves and other of what a decent person we truly are. The castle includes a king or a man-made god in charge to whom we bow and offer our worship. This god protects us from all grief-produced anxieties (loss of control, of youth/health, of meaning, ultimately death). But as much as we worship this god there is still a certain blindness to our incongruities and shortcomings we fail to see: we say we believe one thing and then act otherwise. However, Micah's YHWH wasn't just pointing out human hypocrisy: God wanted to dismantle any static religious certainty (be they doctrinal, social or political) constructed by the people for the purpose of obtaining a sense of control on life (and, by extension, on other people).

What God is trying to say here is: "People cannot control and manipulate communion with God." Communion with God is an ongoing possibility: just as with my relationships with people, the encounter cannot be replicated or crystallized in memorable time discounting the fluidity of the stream of life (or should we say "Life"?) Every moment is a new opportunity to encounter and worship God. God is constantly creating something new, and our enjoyment is to be aware of and to respond to Life as it manifests itself in the present moment, remaining faithful to the divine project and applying the values we have grown to appreciate and live by. In our act of faithfully responding to the promptings of Life, we incarnate the Word of justice and righteousness. In this everyday faithful living people encounter the salvation of God and experience the brightness of the Day of the Lord.

The ritual is not rejected because it is improper, or false, or because it is offered to other gods. The problem is the absence of justice and righteousness, of caring and compassion, of a sense that people matter and they are sacred and not to be exploited, abused, objectified or dehumanized; and without our commitment to these things, there can be no relationship with God to begin with. God's repudiation of Israelite ritual thus ends with a double imperative: take away the noise of your singing, but "let justice flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

¹ Story reported in Peter Rollins, *Insurrection*, p.81