

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Inner Laboratory First Week of Lent Friday, March 14, 2014 8:15 AM
Ez 18:21-28; Mt 5:20-26 (We have to carry around within us an awareness of what we are feeling and discern what we are feeling: where is it leading us?)

Today the first reading from the prophet Ezekiel is the background of Jesus' teaching in which he actually rejects the prophet's view. It comes down to this, **in the prophet's view**, if you do good, meaning good works, follow the Law, you will live; if you do evil works, sin, you will die. Well, that's obviously not true, **then sinners would all be dead and all the people living would be virtuous, but that's not what we see.**

Jesus knew this quite well. He believed in the judgment of God, but only at the end. Now you can interpret "end" either end of the world or end of your own personal life, both have been interpreted that way in Christian tradition, but he just said "the end," the Last Judgment. You can take the Last Judgment to be personal or collective. It has the same ultimate meaning. **We are accountable to God, but we are only judged when our life is over.** Until then there is always the possibility that we can change, and the possibility—that's one thing Jesus accepts from Ezekiel—the possibility that **even the wicked can change.** Now not everyone has accepted that. In fact, there were rabbis, I believe, at the time of Jesus who doubted very sincerely that that was possible.

So Jesus here is presenting a different viewpoint. It's not about simple comportment or behavior or commandments. It's about something else, what's inside of us. This parallels his teaching that it's not what goes into a man that makes him unclean, but what comes out. **Here it's not what a person does that makes him righteous or unrighteous, good or wicked, but it's what starts inside of him.** The inside, the soul, if you will, of a human being is like a little laboratory. In this laboratory there's all kinds of stuff being put together. Some of it is poison. **Sometimes in the laboratory of the inner life people are concocting**

poisons, such as, being “angry with his brother.” That’s a poison; anger is a poison. In one sense it’s natural to have an angry reaction to an injustice, but then one has to get rid of it pretty quickly or it will start to poison the inner recesses of the soul. And if it poisons that, **it will poison the actions that proceed, even bad language**: calling someone “Raqa” or “You fool.” Seemingly words cannot hurt us. Well, in one sense that’s true. “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” That may be true, unless I am the one speaking the words, then they can hurt me. That’s what Jesus is saying. **It’s the speaker who is harmed by his insults and taunts and ridicule and mockery.** And by the way, when a person is mocking and ridiculing and taunting, that one is an agent of the devil, who is the great taunter, the mocker, the derider of all that is good and/or poor or broken.

So we have to keep that in mind, which means we have to become more aware. **We have to carry around within us an awareness of what we are feeling and discern what we are feeling: where is it leading us?** That’s the discernment of spirits. Where is this feeling leading? Am I to become more active in behalf of justice or am I just going to become hateful and negative. Anger could lead either place. So you have to discern: where is it leading? This is the work that Jesus has given us.