

PENTECOST: A TIME TO BE FILLED WITH GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

November 2, 2008

Proper 26

Micah 3:5-12

Psalm 43

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Matthew 23:1-12

Practice what you preach

This week's Gospel text from Matthew is set within the context of Jesus' lengthy discourse with his religious opponents (Matthew 23:13-36). It is intense and, according to Matthew, takes place two chapters after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Thus, we as readers and hearers of the text are drawn into the unfolding drama – aware of the plot against Jesus' life and his impending death by crucifixion.

The first twelve verses (this week's text) record Jesus speaking to his disciples and the crowds who are within earshot. He denounces the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy in that they do not practice what they preach. It is not their teachings that Jesus finds objectionable; rather, it is the way they live (23:3). They burden their constituents with moral obligations that they themselves are unwilling to assume, and engage in public displays of their false piety (23:4-7). In similar fashion, the prophet Micah rails against the injustices of his day and points to the behavior of corrupt leaders and prophets who deceive their constituents in return for payments and bribes (3:5-11).

While Jesus' remarks are directed to the religious opponents of his day, what do his words say to us today? In contrast to the behavior exhibited by the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus exhorts his followers to be humble and to reject self-aggrandizement. Given the current economic woes being experienced by many today, pointing the finger of blame tends to be our immediate reaction. Yet, both the Matthew and Micah texts challenge us to examine our own hearts and acknowledge our own actions which may have created stumbling blocks for others.

In his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 – 7), Jesus teaches about God's kingdom and offers a vision of life marked by justice and compassion. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul reminds us of our calling as disciples of Jesus, and he urges us “to live the kind of life that pleases God, who calls [us] to share in his own Kingdom and glory” (2:12b, *GNT*). As twenty-first century followers of Jesus, let us hold fast to these teachings and practice what we preach through actions that model a lifestyle marked by true humility and service to others. Let us keep our eyes on Jesus who, for our sake, “took the nature of a servant” and “was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death – his death on the cross” (Philippians 2:7b, 8, *GNT*). Because of Jesus' obedience, humility, and ultimate sacrifice, God exalted him, and now

we “openly proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:11, *GNT*).

This week’s Reflection was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Guatemala – With thanks to God for the significant increase in Scripture distribution and for the completion of the Ostuncalco Mam and Pokomchi Bible translations, and with prayers for the country’s new government and that the Church may be a means of reconciliation and the promotion of justice amid the violence and poverty people are experiencing, and that, through outreach programs, many people will be reached with God’s Word and its message of life and hope; **Cuba** – With thanks to God for the Scriptures, scholarly materials, and other resources for the churches and for the Bible seminars that have been held, and with prayers for more of these experiences; **Honduras and El Salvador** -- With prayers for the work of the Bible Societies in these countries.

Activity Corner: “Servant Leadership” Prayers

Supplies needed: Bible; newspapers, news or business magazines.

Scan newspapers or news/business magazines (or news on the internet) for stories about people in positions of leadership. Discuss their actions and styles of leadership in light of Micah 3:5-12 and Matthew 23:1-12. Also make comparisons based on the leadership qualities outlined in Psalm 72. Conclude by reading together Psalm 43:3,4 and pray for the leaders you have identified. At the end of the prayer, invite everyone to respond together: **SEND YOUR LIGHT AND YOUR TRUTH, O GOD.**