

PROPER 23 – B

God of Impossibilities



SCRIPTURES

Job 23:1-9, 16-17 (Track 1)

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 (Track 2)

Psalms 22:1-15 (Track 1)

Psalms 90:12-17 (Track 2)

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

Today's Readings

Today's readings encourage us to work for justice, release our attachment to things and let Jesus form us into a people of compassion. Trusting in God's justice, Job (Track 1) wants God to hear his case in person. Amos (Track 2) decries Israel's unjust treatment of the poor and oppressed. Hebrews claims that only through Jesus will any of this be fully accomplished. Jesus advises a wealthy man who seeks God to obey God's commandments and to detach from his possessions and focus fully on God.

Job 23:1-9, 16-17 (Track 1)

The author of Job tackles the problem of how a just God can permit human suffering. Though the author acknowledges the existence of a persecuting spiritual enemy (1:6–2:7), his conclusion shuns the explanation of suffering in order to achieve a greater goal: the revelation of the mystery of faith in the midst of suffering.

Today's reading comes from Job's reply to the friends who refuse to recognize his innocence and advise him to admit his guilt even if it is not apparent. Sensing the futility of the friends' accusations and explanations because they are based on the commonly accepted view of God's justice, Job wants to bring his dispute with God, his real adversary, to a judgment.

Though he knows he would be outmatched in a direct struggle, he firmly believes that even God would come to see the justice of his cause and consequently the wrongfulness of his suffering.

◆ How does Job understand God and God's values in this reading?

◆ How did you respond when God seemed to be hidden from you?

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 (Track 2)

Amos ministered to the northern kingdom of Israel during the height of its prosperity (760–750 BCE). Its wealth and power rested, however, upon injustice. In scripture, justice is more than the carrying out of abstract legal standards. Justice is completed by the fulfillment of mutual responsibilities that arise from particular relationships within the community, all founded on the basic bond between the covenant community and God. Injustice involves the use of power by the rich and the strong in disregard for the community.

Still God offers life to the people, if they will seek the Lord. They are not to seek God by relying on God's presence at religious shrines. Instead, they are to seek God by ensuring justice for all.

◆ What is Amos's advice for those who would seek the Lord and live?

- ◆ How do Amos’s words speak to your experience of oppression?

Hebrews 4:12-16

This reading unites two summary points based on the author’s discussion about Jesus’ superiority to Moses and the similarity of the Israelites’ situation in the wilderness to that of Christian believers (3:1–4:11). The early Church saw itself as the new people of Israel in the wilderness, living between the time of the exodus and the time of entry into the promised land—the second coming.

God’s word probes the inmost part of our being and reveals our true nature. Yet, in case this warning discourages us, the author reminds us of the graciousness of Jesus, our high priest. Verses 14-16 emphasize Jesus’ solidarity with humanity. Like the high priest who annually made atonement by entering the Holy of Holies (Lev. 16:1-19), so Jesus “has passed through the heavens” to intercede for us. Because Jesus has gone before us, we can approach the throne without fear, confident of finding him ready to dispense mercy.

- ◆ When has God’s Word been most living and active for you?

- ◆ Everything, including our secret thoughts and intentions, is exposed to God. How does that make you feel?

- ◆ Describe the mercy and grace you have found in a time of need.

Mark 10:17-31

Mark’s account of the rich man centers on the difficulties of responding to the call to discipleship. This event illustrates Mark’s parable of the sower, in particular those who hear God’s word “but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing” (Mark 4:18-19). The focus is on God first. Thus Jesus rejects the word *good* for himself and redirects the man’s attention to God, the source of absolute goodness.

The man’s question reveals that he knows of his need for something more than a basic obedience to the commandments. Jesus’ response focuses on the root issue for the man’s conversion—his attachment to things. Jesus does not condemn material possessions, but urges detachment, freedom from “things” that allows for a more radical attachment to God.

Like many in Jesus’ world, the disciples believed that religious duties were easier for the wealthy than for the poor, and that God sent prosperity to the righteous and poverty to the wicked. Jesus’ teaching transcends these human limitations.

He declares that eternal life comes to every human, rich or poor, only as God's gift. God accomplishes what no human can.

- ◆ Why might it be so hard for those who have wealth to enter God's kingdom?
- ◆ Confronted with a seeming impossibility—like a camel trying to go through a needle's eye—what hope does Jesus offer?
- ◆ How have you experienced God's ability to make all things possible?

Reflection

The genius of the gospel is often its unanswered questions. At one level, we don't know what eventually happened to the young man. At another level, the gospel raises questions to answer in our own lives.

In her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, Dr. Rachel Remen distinguishes between *spores* and *seeds*. The first hunkers down and walls off the life force when times are harsh. It is a survival mechanism; thousands of years later when conditions improve, a spore might unfold into a plant. So people may wall off parts of themselves that aren't encouraged in childhood. They do not grow; they simply survive.

- ◆ Some even forget that this is a temporary mode, not a way of life. “What you needed to do to survive may be very different from what you need to do to live.” Reclaiming all the parts of ourselves, even those we may have judged shortcomings, is the first step back to being a fruitful seed.

When Jesus looks at the rich man, what is contained in that look? If it is an invitation to fuller life, then it is even more poignant when he refuses. Only we can answer the question of what will help us live rather than merely survive. We might ask the rich young man for help.

Quietly consider:

- ◆ In what ways, today, can I work with God to bring justice to my world?

Prayer Starter

Christ, my Savior, help me to be more humble, to be a disciple of your kingdom by...

Food for Thought

- ◆ “There is your brother or sister, naked, crying! And you stand confused over the choice of an attractive floor covering.”

—*Ambrose of Milan*