

“THE GOLD IS DULLED”

Lamentations 4:1-2, 4a – 6a, 5:21

The megilloth scroll of “Lamentations” was written by no-one-knows-whom and no-one-knows-when. It was often ascribed to Jeremiah and its background is obviously the fall of Jerusalem, about 587 BCE, but who reads the scroll of Lamentations today? Well, at least it is read once a year in the synagogue, to recall the destruction of Zion, “the” city. It begins with the words, “Alas! Lonely sits the city. Once great with people!” You see, it is an urban book. It is not a collection of peaceful pastoral poems. It is a collection of broken, twisted pieces, poetic fragments often inarticulate in despair. It sounds awesomely contemporary, as though it were written out of the alleyways of London or Bombay, out of the back streets of Chicago or even Durham – or indeed wherever urban life is rotting decay. Only these ancient lyrics are post-apocalyptic, written after the destruction, after the fall, after the death of the city, after the end of what could have been – a golden age: “Alas!” says the poet, “The gold is dulled Gone is the joy of our hearts.”

Who could believe that to be a 2,500 year old lyric? It sounds like nothing other than now. For, you see, the end of what could have been is eternally contemporary. I suppose there is and always has been something suicidal about cities, something self-destructive about the urban mind.

So, we take what could have been “a golden” continent, and in the name of “Progress”, out of ignorance if not downright iniquity, we foul its air, we pollute its water, its soil, and worst of all, its people. We pollute the heart and mind and soul of its people until we make a 2,500 year old school of lamentations sound very contemporary indeed.

Listen to the ancient poet: “Alas! The gold is turned to dross, debased, dulled, the finest gold! The precious children of Zion; once valued as gold -- alas, they are

accounted as earthen pots”. (As we would say, “They are like tin cans!”)
.....”Little children beg for bread; none gives them a morsel. Those who once feasted on dainties lie famished in the streets; those who were reared in purple have embraced garbage heaps. The guilt of my poor people exceeds the iniquity of Sodom.” (4:1-2) “We cannot walk safely in our streets, our doom is near, our days are done” – This doesn’t sound like ancient history, does it? It sounds like tomorrow. And this is an inverted alchemy that works not only in a society – turning it to dross – but also – in individuals. I remember a golden youth – “once valued as gold” – as the poet said, who in less years than it takes to count 10, had shot a fine mind to pieces, wrecked a strong body, taken every golden opportunity of life and deliberately debased it all, turned it all into dross, into lead. Now he sits sodden and sullen and dull and stares. The shine is off of his life forever. “Alas! The gold is turned to dross”. And I remember a boy who said about his 75-year-old grandfather: “I came to live with him. But everything he touches turns to mud, and that includes my father. And it includes me. He poisons the air around him”. And I knew the boy was right. For here was a man who derided, demeaned, debased everything he touched. He saw no good, said no good. He was pious toward God and mean as the devil toward his fellow man. He was all-church and all-cruel. He crushed all independence – all creativity. He was bitter, cynical. As he grew older, he became quite literally a “holy-terror”, than which no terror is more terrifying. He was an insane alchemist, a genius at turning gold into lead. His family endured him, or pitied him, and finally escaped him. And yet he was a man of ability, a handsome man, a man who “could have been” – but “Alas! – The gold is turned to dross, debased the finest gold” –

Now, curiously enough, these are always the people, the very people, who take their own leaden lives, and tell you in no uncertain terms, that everyone else is hopeless, that society is hopeless, that the shining is gone from all of life, that for everyone “doom has come”. And they are truly dangerous people – for despair is highly contagious and besides they may just shoot you before they shoot themselves. This

dark mood of lamentation, this lamentable mood, may be sincere, but it is sincerely dangerous, and only helps bring doomsday one day nearer.

Besides that, any fool can turn gold into lead. This scroll of Lamentations unsparingly lists us all, naming priests, elders, youth and maidens, rich and poor, among the culprits who are a much simpletons as they are sinners and scoundrels. For it takes so little talent to tear the world apart, to destroy, to deride, despair, and do your daily bit to return the ancient doom. These poor devils are often not as wise as they would want to appear to be. More often than not, there is a dullness and a dumbness in destructive deviltry. I.e. – when you try to destroy injustice by destroying justice.

On the other hand – what takes talent is to reverse the easy downward trend. “Take us back, O Lord, to Yourself” says the poet in Lamentations, “Renew our days as of old!” (5:21) That is what takes talent, and effort: renewal, not setting the clock back, but renewing the day today. That takes talent. That takes responsibility. That takes labor. And that takes faith too – faith in yourself, that not all the gold in you is dead, not yet, not even at your age. That takes faith – in your fellows, that not all society is debased, not by a long shot. And that takes faith in God – “Take us back, O Lord, to yourself” – that God is still quite alive, and well, and living where? HERE! Make no mistake, not all the gold is debased, not yet, not ever

Let us pray: O Lord Jesus Christ, you wept over the city, but you never hated it. You never debased it. It killed you, trying to lift it, but your spirit lifts it still. It still puts a shame in hearts that corrupt life. It still puts a shine on every creative act of hope and help, on every touch of human caring. So, “Take us back, O Lord to yourself, and let us come back: Renew our days as of old.” Amen