

What Should We Give to God?

It must have seemed like such a nice idea. King David, triumphant over his enemies and adored by his people, has settled comfortably into his palace in Jerusalem. He's grateful to the Lord for his new home and decides to return the favor by building a fancy temple to house the Ark of the Covenant. Mindful of his religious obligations, David checks with Nathan, the new guy who took over as prophet after Samuel passed away. Nathan gives David a thumbs up, saying, "Go, do all that you have in mind, for the Lord is with you." They're probably both surprised when the Lord interjects with "not so fast, bucko" – in Biblical language, of course.

Our lectionary pairs this passage with two short clips from Mark. The disciples have just returned to Galilee from the mission trip they began before Mark detoured into John the Baptist's death. Jesus tries to isolate them for some much-needed rest, but the crowds find and follow them. Pitying those sheep without a shepherd, Jesus teaches them. The lectionary then skips past the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus's stroll across the Sea of Galilee, picking back up with Jesus and the disciples making landfall at Gennesaret. Again, they're mobbed by crowds – Gentiles, this time – who come running from every nearby village begging to be healed. These two passages feel a little hollow with the major miracles that normally sit between them carved out, and it's not immediately obvious why the lectionary pairs them with David's attempt to build a home for God. But there *is* a connection, so let's dig in and see what we find.

As Indiana Jones could tell you, the Ark of the Covenant was the supreme sacred artifact of biblical Judaism. The top craftsmen of Moses' day built it according to divine specifications, and the Hebrew people carried it with them when the Lord led them out of Egypt on the long journey of the Exodus. The Ark held the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed, a pot of manna and Aaron's rod, but it did *not* contain Adonai. The Ark was kept in the

Holy of Holies, the central chamber of an elaborate tent called the Tabernacle. God didn't dwell in that, either. The Lord traveled with his chosen people in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. The Tabernacle was a central point for worship and sacrifice, a place to commune with Adonai, but the Lord couldn't be contained in it, any more than he could be confined in a temple, no matter how luxurious. The God who traveled in a pillar of smoke and fire and spoke to Job out of a whirlwind couldn't, and can't, be so easily put in a box.

David probably thought he had the best of intentions, but I wonder. Kings like to build ostentatious monuments to themselves as a way to cement their place in posterity. A cedarwood temple, built in a desert community where wood was rare and incredibly expensive, might seem like a fitting gift to Adonai, but it would also be a bold statement about King David's power and wealth. And no matter how beautifully designed and decorated, David's temple would still be a box designed to contain an all-powerful god who had never accepted confinement. I think David's biggest mistake, though, was failing to ask the Lord what he wanted instead of assuming that he knew. As God points out throughout Scripture, his ways are not our ways, and his desires don't necessarily mirror ours. David had every reason to be confident of Adonai's love, but that didn't mean David always knew what he wanted.

That takes us back to Jesus, the disciples, and the crowds. After Jesus authorized them, the disciples could participate in his healing ministry. The crowds came to recognize the disciples along with Jesus, so they were all in demand. As we'll see when we read John's version of the feeding of the five thousand, however, the disciples still didn't understand what Jesus was trying to accomplish. Perhaps that's why he gave them authority to cast out demons and heal the sick but reserved the job of teaching for himself. The disciples had every reason to be confident of Jesus's love, but that didn't mean they always knew what he wanted to say.

So, what does this mean for us? These days, plenty of people say they speak for God. That's always been true to a point; secular and ecclesiastical royalty have laid claim to power by "divine right" since time immemorial. But today, the Internet provides a worldwide platform for anyone who's audacious enough to use it. Offer up a compelling message, and millions may stop to listen. The message doesn't have to be kind, consistent, or even remotely close to Jesus's teachings. It just has to be engaging and memorable. Catchy language helps, as do arresting images. The more often the message is repeated, the more people will come to believe that it's true, even if it's an outrageous, outright lie.

One way to quickly capture a lot of attention is pretending to know whom God despises. If a message predicts a wrathful God eternally damning someone the audience already dislikes or fears, it tends to be all the more effective. Encouraging people to think of themselves as saved and superior to the "miserable sinners" whom God is about to smite can whip an audience into a self-righteous frenzy that leads them to do terrible things.

There are a couple of problems with that approach in addition to its obvious dangers. For one thing, Jesus never smote anybody. When Herod murdered his cousin, when Judas betrayed him, when Peter denied him, when Pilate's soldiers spit on him, whipped him, mocked him, beat him, and nailed him to a cross, Jesus never once responded with violence. Our Lord does not smite, and it's a mistake to think that accidents, unfortunate coincidences or bloodshed inflicted in Jesus's name are ever his doing. They're not. For another thing, Jesus told us that, at the end of the age, he alone will judge the living and the dead. No one else, not even his disciples, has been authorized to do it for him. Judgment was and is reserved to Christ alone.

Those of us who preach and teach Scripture are especially privileged. We've been entrusted to bring the precious Word of God to those with hearts and ears to hear, and our

privilege comes with a grave responsibility. I can't pretend that the Gospels are clear beyond interpretation, but I'm convinced that our faith requires clergy to stay as true as we can to what Jesus actually said and did. It's our responsibility never to put our words in his mouth, even if we desperately wish he'd said or done something he didn't. One thing he never did – look it up if you don't believe me – was encourage his followers to condemn or hurt anyone, even those whom we might think richly deserved it. When Peter took up a sword to defend Jesus at his arrest, Jesus told Peter to put the weapon down and healed the man he injured. Our Lord was loving and gentle, and he did his best to make sure the disciples were, too. That tells me we must also be loving and gentle, even when every instinct is screaming for us to lash out with angry words or physical violence.

We're headed into a difficult season. There will be plenty of temptation to offer our God gifts conceived in anger and self-righteousness. Some of us may try to defend God by saying or doing hateful things to those with whom we disagree. Some may interpret random events as evidence of God's will and act out accordingly. It will be especially important not to assume we know what God wants, but to go back to Scripture and ask. When we do, I believe that the Son of God who healed the sick, cured the lame, cast out demons, and brought good news to the poor will tell us to go forth and peaceably do the same.

Instead of pumping our fists in anger, we are called as Christ's followers to lift our hands in prayer and service to those in need. Let the pundits pontificate and the politicians bellow. Ignore them. Our job is to keep faith with our Lord in these difficult times, putting anger aside, feeding his sheep and bringing hope and healing to the least among us. After all, whatever we do for them, we do for Jesus. He has told us that caring for his people is the gift he wants most of all. We can be confident in Jesus's love as we gratefully give him what he most desires. Amen.