

“In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash.”¹

One of the funniest books I have ever read was written by the storyteller and observer of human foibles, Jean Shepherd. His childhood reminiscences were the basis for the movie “A Christmas Story.” The book that inspired the movie begins with a man returning to his hometown one snowy day. Before going to his family home he stops off in a nearby watering hole. As he is having a drink and chatting with the barkeep he notices the sign over the cash register. It reads, “In God we trust, all others pay cash.”

While it may not be apparent at first glance I believe that trust and especially trust in God is one of the themes running through today’s readings. In the Genesis story we have the ongoing narrative of Abram² to whom God has promised descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands of the desert. The problem is that Abram is very old and his wife is well past childbearing years. Yet Abram has continued to follow YHWH’s (יהוה) instructions going wherever God sends him after leaving his home in Ur of the Chaldeans. In today’s passage Abram expresses doubt that he will possess the land that YHWH has promised him. So God performs a ritual to assure him. Think of this ritual like God getting a notary to witness a contract.

Psalms 27 is a poem of trust in God, at least initially. At its end it is reassurance that God is faithful. The poet writes. “O tarry and await the LORD’s pleasure; be strong, and he shall comfort your heart; wait patiently for the LORD.”

Paul’s Letter to the Philippians deals with a congregation distracted by those who live a high life. Paul assures them that living with disregard for God is a hollow life. While food and drink may be satisfying now “their glory is in their shame.”³ Those who “are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” will “be conformed to the body of his glory.”⁴

Finally, we come to the gospel where the issue of trust may not be quite as obvious. Here we see Jesus apparently being warned by his perpetual enemies the Pharisees to go into hiding because Herod Antipas⁵ wants to kill him. It seems unlikely that Herod really desires to kill Jesus. He only killed John the Baptist because of his wife’s anger at John and the foolish promise he made to his daughter. Rather he wants to meet Jesus. But the Pharisees who do not trust Jesus want to scare him into hiding out rather than continuing on his journey to Jerusalem.

Jesus could have set aside his trust in God and gone into hiding, but he knows in whom to put his trust. It is not the Pharisees. Jesus knows that he is headed to his death in Jerusalem. He would not have set out on this journey if he

¹ This is the title of a book by Jean Shepherd.

² God will rename him Abraham in Genesis 17:5 Abram means “high father” and Abraham “father of many.” God also renames Sarai (my princess) to Sarah meaning mother of nations.

³ Philippians 3:19

⁴ Philippians 3:30-21

⁵ This is Herod Antipas son of Herod the Great who was tetrarch over Galilee under the Romans.

did not trust in the Lord God. So he responds with a snarky saying that is intended more for the Pharisees than Herod. He cleverly uses the image of a fox that is considered cunning and sly in Greco-Roman culture. The fox is also one who hides out in its underground den as the Pharisees were suggesting that Jesus do.

Furthermore, Jesus lays out his agenda for heading to Jerusalem when he states, he is “casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work;” the last part is an allusion to the day of his rising from the tomb. He also points to his triumphal entry into Jerusalem when he says, “you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’” Jesus trusts even to death on a cross.

The sign in the bar is amusing; although it is also ironic that the phrase “In God We Trust” is stamped and printed on our money. It seems to me that many more people trust in money, material goods, IRAs, and stock portfolios than actually put their trust in God.

In this season of Lent, we are asked to renew our trust in God. As Jesus says “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”⁶

We are called by Jesus and in fact the entire biblical tradition, Old and New Testament, to trust in God, to have faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. As the Psalm 27 affirms

- 1 The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom then shall I fear? *
the LORD is the strength of my life;
of whom then shall I be afraid?
- 7 For in the day of trouble he shall keep me safe
in his shelter; *
he shall hide me in the secrecy of his dwelling
and set me high upon a rock.
- 14 Though my father and my mother forsake me, *
the LORD will sustain me.

Seek the Lord. Rebuild and strengthen your trust in God. God was our help in ages past and God is our only hope in years to come. All else will fail us, only God is true. To quote St. Paul, “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love... stand firm in the Lord.”⁷

⁶ Matthew 6:19-21 NRSV

⁷ Philippians 4:1 NRSV