

Comments

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 3, 2023

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Exodus 3:1-15

NRSV

Moses has been forced to flee Egypt because his murder of an Egyptian slave-master became known. He fled to the Sinai peninsula ("Midian"), and married Zipporah, daughter of Jethro (or Reuel). Back in Egypt, the Pharaoh (probably Seti I) has died, and those under the yoke of slavery have become restive.

Moses is shepherding "beyond the wilderness": a mysterious place like the *deep in the forest* of fairy tales. Near Mount Sinai ("Horeb") a messenger from God (or God himself) appears to him in the form of fire – a symbol implying passion, purity, light, mystery and (here) not extinguishable. Moses is curious (v. 3) and leaves Jethro's sheep. What follows is the archetype for the calling of a prophet. God appears to the person and urges him to return to his people and serve as his spokesman, despite any opposition he may encounter, and his own shortcomings. As we find with other prophets (e.g. Jeremiah, Jonah), Moses is reluctant: in fact, he refuses four times! He has reason for not returning to Egypt, and yet he does return, because he believes that he is sent by God. Moses, like Abraham and Samuel, acknowledges God's call by saying "Here I am" (v. 4). Removing one's footwear (v. 5) was a common form of respect in the ancient Near East. God identifies himself as the God of the patriarchs, to whom he made promises of protection in return for loyalty (v. 6). God is compassionate; he has come to intervene, to "deliver" (v. 8) "my people" (v. 7) from the Egyptians, to bring them to Canaan. (The peoples in v. 8 were indigenous to Palestine at the time.) God gives Moses his commission (v. 10) but Moses presents an excuse: "who am I" (v. 11) to do this? God answers: "I will be with you" (v. 12); you will all worship me here. Moses raises another objection: what do I tell people your name is? (v. 13) To know someone's name was to have power over him, or at least understand his very being. God's answer is enigmatic and the Hebrew is unclear: it can be translated *He who causes to be what comes into existence* or it may indicate presence, and be intentionally vague. (No one has power over God.) Moses is commanded to tell the Israelites that his title is YHWH or Yahweh (in Hebrew), or "LORD" (v. 15).

Psalms 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c

NRSV

In vv. 1-6 the people of Israel, God's people, the "offspring of ... Abraham" (v. 6), are invited, as they worship ("Glory in his holy name", v. 3, and "seek the LORD"), to acknowledge all that God has done for them ("wonderful works", v. 5, "miracles", and "judgements"). The psalm then tells biblical history, from the covenants with the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) to entry into the Promised Land. The perspective is a particular one: God is the motivating force behind all of history. "Ham" (v. 23) is a poetic name for Egypt. God caused Pharaoh and the Egyptians to hate and deceive Israel – so they would undertake the Exodus under

Moses and Aaron (vv. 23-26).

Romans 12:9-21

NRSV

In the preceding chapters, Paul has told us about the "mercies of God" (v. 1), i.e. what God has done for those who have faith in him. In vv. 1-8, he began to explain what our response should be, what is involved in living the ethical life, what obedience to God means, what Christian ethics is, what *servicing the Lord* (v. 11) is.

"Let love be genuine" (v. 9) introduces instructions on what it means to be *loving* towards others. V. 10 can be rendered: *Have brotherly love for your fellow Christian; treat him or her with the greatest honour*. Then vv. 11-12: do not allow your "zeal" for Christ to slacken; be fervent in the Holy Spirit; "serve the Lord". Rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, looking beyond the present suffering to the future, keep praying. We are to *share with* ("Contribute to", v. 13) the "saints", the holy ones, our fellow Christians. Practising hospitality to Christians from other places ("strangers", v. 13) was important in the early Church, public accommodation being infested with prostitutes and bandits.

Paul now says what pursuing "what is good" (v. 9) requires in our attitude to those beyond the community. He seems to be drawing on the gospel tradition (but not the gospels *per se* – they were yet to be written.) V. 14 is in the Sermon on the Mount. Hold all in mutual esteem, not thinking oneself better than others (v. 16). Seek out what is "noble" (v. 17) in others. To the extent that you can control the situation, "live peaceably with all" (v. 18). Never even desire revenge (v. 19); leave handling sin to God (at the end of time). Perhaps v. 20 says that by *shaming* "your enemies" they may *come round*, repent. Do good when faced with evil (v. 21).

Matthew 16:21-28

NRSV

Jesus has been instructing his disciples about the mission they are to carry out on his behalf, about telling the good news. Now his message to them shifts to teaching them that he, the Messiah, must (per God's will and purpose), undergo great suffering – something inconceivable to most Jews. ("Jerusalem" is the city where prophets are put to death.) Peter grasped that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God", (v. 16) but he cannot yet deal with the impending death of the Messiah, rather than his direct ascendance to glory.

Then v. 24: to be Jesus' followers, we must devote the whole thrust of our lives to God ("deny themselves"), not reserving any part for our personal goals. Be willing to give up physical comfort and safety, accepting martyrdom if necessary. This approach to life will lead to true life with God. V. 26 asks a rhetorical question: nothing that one can get or "gain" now measures up to what God will give to the faithful in the time to come. There will be a reckoning, when Jesus comes in glory at the end of time. Some who hear these words now will still be alive at the Judgment Day (v. 28). People in the early church expected the age to end within their own lifetimes; however some today see the Transfiguration (which follows in Chapter 17) as fulfilment of this prophecy.