

Comments**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost September 28, 2008**

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 17:1-7

NRSV

The Israelites travel “by stages” towards the Promised Land. As God showed his power during their slavery, winning their freedom by inflicting ten plagues on the Egyptians, he now tests the Israelites’ faith in him, as provider and ruler, ten times. If they trust in him, he will save them. This reading is about one of the tests, but who tests whom? (vv. 2, 7). Earlier, at Marah, the people had water but it was bitter; here, at “Rephidim” (v. 1, an oasis in the Negev or Sinai) there is no water at all; the well has run dry. The Israelites are serious: the Hebrew translated “quarrelled” (v. 2) is a legal term. They bring a case against Moses, but to him, their charge is against God: they doubt that he can feed them, be their god, in this hostile desert environment. As in other tests, God simply grants the people’s request, without rebuking them. He orders Moses to take representatives of the people, “some of the elders” (v. 5) to the “rock at Horeb” (v. 6). The elders see his show of power. The parallel with Egypt continues: the “staff” (v. 5) is the same one Moses used to poison the Nile. (“Massah and Meribah”, v. 7, come from words for *test* and *quarrel*.) In giving manna, bread from heaven, earlier, and now water (from an earthly rock), God shows his mastery over creation.

Psalm 78:1-4,12-16

NRSV

This psalm, used at major festivals, tells the story of the people of Israel from the Exodus to the reign of David – as a way of teaching that God has continued his saving acts in history in spite of the unfaithfulness of his people. The Hebrew word translated “parable” (v. 2) has a wide meaning; here it means wise instruction – based not only on knowledge but also on long experience, of God’s ways. It is important that coming generations know about God and his marvellous interventions in human affairs (his military “might”, v. 4, and “wonders”); may his deeds of the past not be forgotten (v. 7); may all live by his Law. “Zoan” (v. 12) is Ramases, the city from which the Exodus began. V. 14 recalls God’s presence in the wilderness: a pillar of “cloud” by day and one of fire (“fiery light”) at night, and vv. 15-16 the event described in today’s Old Testament reading. May future generations not be like their “stubborn and rebellious” (v. 8) ancestors, who were “not faithful to God”

Philippians 2:1-13

NRSV

There is of course “encouragement in Christ”, so Paul urges the Christians at Philippi: through it, and moved by God’s love for them, may they to “be of the same mind[set], having the same love, being in full accord ...” (v. 2). May they “regard others as better than ... [themselves]” (v. 3), freely adopting a lowly, unasertive stance before others, replacing self-interest with concern for others.

Vv. 5-11 are an early Christian hymn to which Paul has added v. 8b. He exhorts his readers to be of the same mindset as Jesus – one that is appropriate for them, given their existence “in Christ” (v. 5). Christ was “in the form of God” (v. 6): he was already like God; he had a God-like way of being, e.g. he was not subject to death. He shared in God’s very nature. Even so, he did not “regard” being like God “as something to be exploited”, i.e. to be used for his own purposes. Rather, he “emptied himself” (v. 7), made himself powerless and ineffective – as a slave is powerless, without rights. He took on the likeness of a human being, with all which that entails (except sin), including death. As a man, he lowered (“humbled”, v. 8) himself, and throughout his life in the world, was fully human and totally obedient to God, even to dying. (Paul now adds: even to the most debasing way of dying, crucifixion – reserved for slaves and the worst criminals.)

God actively responded to this total denial of self, his complete *living and dying for others*, by placing him above all other godly people (“highly exalted him”, v. 9), and bestowing on him the name, title and authority of “Lord” (v. 11) over the whole universe (“heaven”, v. 10, “earth”, “under the earth”). This authority, before Christ came to us, the Father reserved for himself. Paul recalls God’s words spoken through Isaiah: “From every corner of the earth [all are to] turn to me and be saved; for I am God ... to me every knee shall bow ... to me every tongue shall swear, saying ‘In the Lord alone are victory and might ... all Israel’s descendants will be victorious and will glory in the Lord’”; the Philippians shall worship him; confessing that “Jesus Christ is Lord” (v. 11) is proclaiming the victory and might of God. The ultimate goal is the “glory of God the Father”, the reclamation of God’s sovereignty, his power over, and presence in, the universe. So (v. 12) may they, using Christ’s example of obedience and lowliness (“fear and trembling”), continue to “work out” their “salvation” with God’s help in what they intend (“will”, v. 13) and what they do (“work”).

Matthew 21:23-32

NRSV

In the final week of his earthly life, Jesus has just shown the importance of faith in understanding God’s ways. Now, as he teaches in the Temple, representatives of the Sanhedrin (“chief priests and the elders”) ask who has given him the power and “authority” to do all that he has done in his ministry. But he will only answer them if they first answer his question (v. 25), one which will show whether they have the requisite faith to understand his answer. His questioners are skilled in the Law, but it is of little help in deciding whether a prophet (in this case John the Baptist) is genuinely from God. If they say that John was from God, they should have repented as he urged; if they say he was not, they will lose face and status with the many who have come to Jesus (v. 26). The Sanhedrin judged such issues, so their answer (v. 27) shows their incompetence. Jesus tells them a parable about admission to the kingdom (vv. 28-30). People known for their evil ways (“tax collectors ...”, v. 31) have turned to God (like the first son), while the authorities, (like the second son), have observed the *rules* (note “sir”, v. 30) but have not acted on them. But they can still come to faith; even if they do, people considered to be disreputable will enter the Kingdom “ahead of you” (v. 31).