

The Bible Challenge

Meditations Week 4 (January 27-February 1)

Day 22: Exodus 4-6; Psalm 18:21-50; Matthew 19

by Professor Deirdre Good

Every community has to have rules and communities around Jesus are no exception. Keeping God's commandments, namely, the law (Torah), is a hallmark of Matthew's community. "Don't think that I have come to destroy the law and the prophets," Jesus says in Matthew 5:17, "I have come not to destroy but to fulfil them."

Being in a community means being obedient to God. At the heart of Psalm 18, verses 30-31 explain that God's way is perfect and that God is a shield for all who take refuge in him. Keeping the commandments of God is a way of being obedient to God. In addition, early followers of Jesus practised giving away possessions.

Matthew's 19th chapter occurs in a section of the gospel in which a community, having been formed around Jesus, begins to regulate itself. Praying the Lord's Prayer with Jesus (Matthew 6) has already identified community members as siblings addressing God as Heavenly Father. Chapter 18 identifies both membership and mechanisms for discipline in the community in the case of a brother or sister sinning against a community member while chapter 19 seeks to regulate divorce in a context of marriage and children.

Jesus elsewhere prohibits divorce (Mark 10). But in Matthew 19, we hear teaching on divorce which moderates Mark 10 and lets us see that Jesus' teaching on divorce was not univocal. Characters in the narrative include Matthew's Pharisees who question Jesus on a controversial topic and Matthew's disciples who seek to understand Jesus' teaching. Topics in the narrative fall under the rubric of Jesus' instruction to disciples about entering the Kingdom of Heaven by keeping the commandments and include divorce, eunuchs, and children.

Responding to Matthew's Pharisees, Jesus proposes to tighten up divorce legislation and permit it only in one (unclear) circumstance. Whatever Jesus meant, the disciples didn't hear it as a concession, and they reflect that it would be better not to marry. So Jesus teaches that there is indeed a select group of disciples who do not marry: those who have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom. In the world of Jesus there were eunuchs in Hellenistic courts and Isaiah 56, written after the exile, included eunuchs in a Torah observant community.

QUESTIONS

- How does your Christian community regulate itself?
- Are there ever circumstances in which someone might be exiled from a community?
- How does your Christian community reflect diversity including unmarried people?

PRAYER

O God, you have bound us together in a common life. Help us, in the midst of our struggles for justice and truth, to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 23: Exodus 7-9; Psalm 19; Matthew 20

by Professor Deirdre Good

The Psalmist of Psalm 19 delights in the Torah, the law of God, and expresses joy in God's instruction that sets Israel apart from other nations. Meditation on the Torah here and in other Psalms (see, for example, Psalm 1), involves reflection on study and practice of Torah-obedience. Reading and memorizing Psalms is something Jesus did. Psalms 18 and 19 are also profound meditations on the ideal orientation of a person in authority towards God. The readings from Exodus show a struggle between Pharaoh and God concerning the exercise of power over others.

Matthew's parable of the laborers in the vineyard of the kingdom (Matt 20:1-15) describes the means by which those who came late to the employment office for the vineyard are paid the same as all day laborers on the basis of God's generous justice. It provides analogies for many situations and circumstances on which we are invited to reflect, all of which involve the inclusion of latecomers to the rewards of labor.

Those who were able to commit early to the labor of the vineyard might well resent that others added to the workforce receive, at the end of the day, the same wages as those who "bore the burden of the day and the scorching heat." To them the vineyard owner explains that they are not unjustly treated: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (The Greek text is different: Is your eye evil because I am good?) What is given is not only generous, but as it is given by God, it is also just.

Those who challenge generous justice, having already been paid, seem greedy and their envy would deny God's generosity to all who need it. Those who receive generous justice as the (unexpected) reward of their labors have only gratitude for God. So it is with those who come latterly to labor in the vineyard. We as latecomers are the recipients of God's surprising generosity for which we have nothing but gratitude. And in the end, whether we work early or late, aren't we all laboring side by side in the vineyard of the kingdom?

QUESTIONS

- What are the shortcomings of "equal work for equal pay?"
- How has God's justice been manifest in human history?

PRAYERS

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart, and especially the hearts of the people of this land, that barriers that divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Gracious Father, we pray for your holy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of him who died and rose again, and ever lives to make intercession for us, Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

Day 24: Exodus 10-12; Psalm 20; Matthew 21

by Professor Deirdre Good

Today we reflect further on the exercise of power, whether that of God, or human rulers like Pharaoh, or any other leader. The readings from Exodus relate the origins of Passover as the story of the deliverance of Jews from Egypt celebrated today as Pesach.

In Matthew 21, Jesus enters Jerusalem as a king. Images of “the triumphal entry” show Jesus on a donkey entering the holy city to universal acclamation. People wave palm branches and shout approval. Contrast this with the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt in silence and terror (Matthew 2) where Jesus fled for his life with his mother Mary and Joseph. Now Jesus rides in to Jerusalem not as a triumphant ruler in a victory procession but as a meek king fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah for Jerusalem crowds and gospel readers. (Modern translations prefer the word “humble”). Contemporary treatises on Hellenistic kingship in Jesus’ day describe a meek king as a non-coercive leader who practices disciplined calmness over oneself and is benevolent and magnanimous to others. Since Roman Empire was the dominant power in Jesus’ day, rulers and kings were not autonomous. As a client king, Jesus looks to God for help in time of threat and success in struggle (Psalm 20) and brokers God’s kingdom to others.

Entering the temple, Jesus overturns the money changers tables, thus symbolically reforming it. Jesus welcomes into the temple hitherto marginalised and excluded groups: the blind, the lame

and the children and it is this that causes the temple authorities to become angry. Upon leaving the temple, and finding no fruit on a fig tree, Jesus curses it and it immediately withers. This is a symbolic comment on the ineffectiveness of temple leadership. Within the temple courts Jesus then instigates five controversies with the Jerusalem Temple religious elite. Such controversies characterise Jesus' speech with opponents in the gospels. These encounters end with silence of opposition and Jesus' last words. Discussions about exercising power do not belong to ages past. In the 1993 movie "Schindler's List", Oscar Schindler, a Jewish businessman, discusses power with the prison camp leader Amon Goeth. He is trying to persuade Goeth to release Polish Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto into employment in his factory and so save them from death.

Schindler: They fear us because we have the power to kill arbitrarily. A man commits a crime, he should know better. We have him killed and we feel pretty good about it. Or we kill him ourselves and we feel even better. That's not power, though, that's justice. That's different than power. Power is when we have every justification to kill – and we don't.

Goeth: You think that's power.

Schindler: That's what the emperors had. A man stole something, he's brought in before the emperor, he throws himself down on the ground, he begs for mercy, he knows he's going to die. And the emperor pardons him. This worthless man, he lets him go.

Goeth: I think you are drunk.

Schindler: That's power, Amon. That is power.
(Schindler gestures toward Goeth as a merciful emperor) Amon, the Good.

Goeth: (He smiles and laughs) I pardon you.

PRAYER

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and

uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us to do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in your light we may see light, and in your straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 25: Exodus 13-15; Psalm 21; Matthew 22

by Christopher Wells

The famous story of Israelite exodus, via miraculous escape from pursuing Egyptian armies through a parted Red Sea, culminates in the Song of Moses. Anglicans may know this as a canticle for morning prayer: a hymn to the LORD's power and might, his faithfulness to the people he redeemed (Ex. 15:13).

It's worth reflecting on the liturgical fact that as Christians sing this song, like when we pray the psalms, we add at the end a trinitarian coda: "Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen." This frame of Christian prayer underlines the consistency of God's character in all of Scripture, across time and space. God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Thus, God is ever interested in saving and perpetuating a people, across many generations, who may learn to say of their own life: I also came up out of Egypt (13:8). Or, as in Jesus' wedding banquet parable: I was one whom God found on the street and rescued, and am now, by grace, clothed in life and light (Mt. 22:9-14).

In this way, we become scriptural people: a people who, by knowing the scriptures, know the power of God, as Jesus repeatedly demonstrates to the baffled Pharisees and Sadducees.

PRAYER

Lord, shine the light of your Word on my life. Help me to understand and live by your teaching. Make me your humble child, glad with the joy of your presence. Amen.

Day 26: Exodus 16-18; Psalm 22; Matthew 23

by Christopher Wells

Again, Scripture echoes from “old” to “new” and back again. We discover that Jesus’ familiar cry of dereliction on the cross comes in the words of Psalm 22 (we may recognize other parts of this psalm as read in Lenten services of the stations of the cross). As ever, the prayer opens out to the universalizing vocation of Jacob/Israel, not least as we Gentiles gratefully join the chorus: “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall bow before him” (v. 26)—an extraordinary prophecy of missionary success, especially fit for meditation in the season of Epiphany. Imagine the people of God stretched out across the earth, incorporating every nation and people. This is the Church, the reconciled community of Jew and Gentile (see Ephesians 2; Roman 9-11), the communion of the whole world.

Jesus’ in-your-face polemic against the religious authorities of his day gathers prophetic steam in this light. Do what they teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do (Mt. 23:3), for Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill the law. In this way he calls “Jerusalem” back to her roots, in an apocalyptic anticipation of the end, when the figures of old will find their fulfillment in the words of Psalm 118, adopted as the Benedictus of the mass: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (23:39).

Speaking of our sojourning Israelites, St. Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 10: “they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ,” in a boldly christological rendering of Exodus 17:6. What does this mean? That Jesus Christ comprehends history, as Word of God. All the rest is commentary.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, prepare us for your return, and make us capable of caring for the world, as members of your universal family. Amen.

Day 27: Exodus 19-21; Psalm 23; Matthew 24

by Christopher Wells

Perhaps no psalm is better known than the 23rd, for good reason. Many children and new believers learn it as an introduction to the Lord of heaven and earth: God is our tender Father and protector, Jesus is our good shepherd (see John 10), and the Holy Spirit is our ever-present comfort in time of need. Once we know this it is hard to forget, and so mature believers rightly return to these words for the personal reassurance of God's promises, as we place our trust in him: *I shall not be in want; I shall fear no evil; your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*

This being the case, it may be jarring to read Jesus' rather different assurance to his disciples: "all will be thrown down" (Mt. 24:2). And he spends some time here (as in Luke) elaborating on the nature and extent of the trials to come, as signs of the long-awaited messianic age, about which Jesus had queried the Pharisees several days ago (22:41ff.). War, famine, and earthquake will mark the birth pangs, followed by necessary persecution and martyrdom of the faithful and a thinning of their ranks—truly, a time of great suffering, unlike any other. "This gospel" will, however, "be proclaimed throughout the world," says Jesus, "as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come" (24:14).

Here is the good news, consonant with the psalm: that our end will be in Christ, albeit not without pain and difficulty. This world will end, before it is re-made as the kingdom. The words of God will not pass away (Mt. 24:35), and in these we hide our hearts. "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin" (Ex. 20:20).

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, stay with us, for evening is at hand and the day is past; be our companion in the way, kindle our hearts, and awake hope, that we may know you as you are revealed in Scripture and the breaking of bread. Grant this for the sake of your love. Amen