

Saturday 16 March 2019

Scripture: Deuteronomy 26:16-19; Ps 118 (suggest verses 1-8 – rather than the whole of it...); Matthew 5: 43-48

Moses said,

'Today the Lord has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep his commandments; for him to set you high above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honour; and for you to be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised.'

These words were spoken to the Hebrew people as they were about to enter the Promised Land. Moses laid before them two paths – that of God leading to life and that away from God leading to death. Understandably, they chose the path of life. They did not always stick to it any more than anyone else ever does. But Moses sees what their decision means in all its fullness – they will be a treasured people – held in praise and honour – and they will be God's holy people. The Jewish people kept that covenant for hundreds of years until the One came who was to be the fulfilment of it. It is this legacy we honour when we read what we call the "Old Testament" – the Hebrew (and a few Greek) Scriptures.

- How many Jewish people do you know?
- How are we as Christians the heirs to this great story of God's love and honour for the people he brought out of Egypt and to whom he gave the Law and way of life that leads to life?

Today is the Jewish Sabbath. Pray for the Jewish people and thank God for their treasuring of the great scriptures that enrich our understanding of our faith in Christ who was, of course, steeped in them.

GOD'S GIFT OF LOVE AND MERCY:

GRATITUDE



1st Sunday of Lent Sunday 10 March 2019

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Sunday 10 March 2019

Scripture: Deuteronomy 26: 4-10, Psalm 90(91), Romans 10: 8-13, Luke 4: 1-13

Moses said to the people, 'The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.'

The Exodus is a powerful myth among the Jewish people – but we must be careful how we interpret that word “myth”. There is not much in the way of archaeological evidence for the Hebrews’ time in Egypt or of their long sojourn in the wilderness but it is clear from this myth that something happened – something so big that it can only be explained by a kind of story: That an ancient people lived in the mighty Kingdom of Egypt and God heard their appeals when they were oppressed and called them out into the wilderness – gave them the Law which opened up a new way of life to them – and gave them a country in which to live it out. It would be possible to state all these things as dry facts – but the power of the God’s deed deserves the power and eloquence of story.

- What do you think the difference is between a fairy story and a myth?
- How does a well-told story or myth convey truth in a way facts and figures cannot?

Read through the extract again and, if time permits the whole First Reading. You might try reading it as a dry account of “this is what happened” – and then re-read it as someone might direct it in a play or film. Reflect on the difference it makes to how you receive the truths the account is offering to us.

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Friday 15 March 2019

Scripture: Ezekiel 18:21-28; Psalm 129(130); Matthew 5:20-26

The Lord says,

'If the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?'

This is a very reassuring passage for most of us – and is part of what Lent is about. During this season, we try to turn away from sin – the things that take us away from God. For many of us, there is the lingering doubt about whether we can truly put those things behind us. The reality is that, in this life, we often have to live with the consequences of what we have done – or not done. But, in God’s eyes, the turning away is a thing of beauty in itself and assures us that it is worth the doing as it will lead us to a richer, fuller life.

- Are there sins that you are convinced have not been – or cannot be – forgiven?
- How do Ezekiel’s words convince you that it is worth trying to turn ever more fully to the path of right and away from sin?

Think today of times when you have chosen wrong paths. Consider making time to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation to deal with them there. If you have received absolution but are still haunted by the sin, pray with this passage and for the gift of trust in God’s love and mercy. If necessary, find someone you trust to talk it through with and pray together for a release from what holds you bound.

Thursday 14 March 2019

Scripture: Esther 4: 17; Psalm 137; Matthew 7: 7-12

*Esther prayed,
'As for ourselves, save us by your hand,
and come to my help, for I am alone
and have no one but you, Lord.'*

Esther is one of the few women we have a name for in the scriptures but her part in saving her people was crucial. Ahasuerus is a Persian king who dismisses one of his wives because she refused to come and appear naked before his guests... a reasonable thing to do but not in the eyes of one who demanded unquestioning obedience. He then chose Esther because of her great beauty but Esther had a problem – she was Jewish and Ahasuerus had decided that all Jews should be killed. Mordecai, her uncle, begged her to intercede for her people but she knew that she risked her own life if she went to the king without being summoned. Today's First Reading is, then, the prayer of a queen torn between her own survival and that of her people – the prayer of one who, despite her royal status, had no power save that which God gave her.

- What do you imagine it felt like to Esther as she weighed up what to do?
- How did prayer give her the courage to do what was needed to save her people?

Pray today for people who, today, feel helpless in the face of power.

Monday 11 March 2019

Scripture: Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18; Psalm 18; Matthew: 25:31-46

*The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:
'Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them:
You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.'*

If you have time to read the whole passage, you will get a great insight into what holiness as God sees it looks like. It does not actually mention hours in prayer – though clearly prayer is one of our strongest tools in building holiness. It seems to be much more about how we treat each other – our attitude towards each other – our willingness to be kind and merciful to those who are vulnerable. It also reminds us that, if this is what holiness means, how much more compassionate and holy is our God.

- What does practical holiness look like to you?
- How are kindness and respect help us grow in holiness – in giving but also in receiving them?

If you have chance to read the whole reading do so and ponder the examples that we are given for what holiness looks like. Some of them are obvious – like not stealing... but what about not bearing grudges? Reflect on your own call to holiness and what it might look like in practice today/ tomorrow.

Tuesday 12 March 2019

Scripture: Isaiah 55: 10-11; Psalm 33(34); Matthew 6:7-15

The Lord says:

*'For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.'*

It is quite hard to see how we could take an extract from this reading – and so we have used all of it today. It is still quite early in the year – and still possible that we will have snow and almost certain that we will have rain. Although few of us truly relish either of them when they go on for a long time, they provide the seeds that are beginning to germinate with what they need to start to grow. God tells us that just as they fall on the ground and help it to bear fruit, so his word and Spirit flow into us and help the ground of our souls bear the fruits God has planted there.

- How useful do you find the image of rain and snow being like God's word at work in our lives?
- What might God's purpose at work in your life be?

Spend some time today thinking about how God provides the moisture that softens the soil of your heart and encourages the growth of the new and beautiful. You might like to take a stroll outside and look for signs of new growth there – taking up the moisture of the ground to begin the growing it will continue long into the months ahead. Thank God for their example – and pray for the grace to respond in a similar way.

Wednesday 13 March 2019

Scripture: Jonah 3:1-10; Psalm 50(51); Luke 11:29-32

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.'

Most of us have heard of Jonah and the whale – the prophet who was sent to Nineveh and who tried to avoid the task only to be swallowed by a large sea-creature and vomited up on the shore. He was understandably intimidated. Nineveh was a great city and the king wielded great power – and here was poor Jonah being told to tell them that all this might and beauty was about to be cast into ruins. He probably expected to be lynched for his audacity but, amazingly, this did not happen. Was it the power of Jonah's words – or something else that convinced the king and the people that they should call a fast and take off fine clothes and replace them with sackcloth as a sign of their desire to rebuild their relationship with God?

- How much do you sympathise with Jonah in the mission God sets before him?
- What do you think might have persuaded the Ninevites to change their ways?

Spend some time today in thinking about this image of God – the powerful one who would ruin a city because of the sin of the people in it – and the merciful one who responds with forgiveness to those who try to put things right. Which image of God is closest to the one you have?