

Comments

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 10, 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 12:1-14

NRSV

God has assailed the Egyptians with nine plagues: turning the water of the Nile to blood; infestations of frogs, gnats, and flies; terminal illness of livestock; boils; thunder, hail and fire; locusts; and darkness for three days: all this to convince the Pharaoh to “Let my people go, so that they may worship ... [God]” (9:1). The Pharaoh has refused to listen; he has refused to come to the knowledge that “I am the LORD” (7:17).

God continues to act in history to the benefit of his chosen people. As is the case for the other plagues, the preparation for the last plague is described at length, but the plague itself occupies only a few verses. A lamb or goat is to be kept in safe-keeping (“keep it”, v. 6) until close to the full moon (“the fourteenth day”); then “the whole assembled congregation” will slaughter it: here all take on the role of priests. The priestly role extends further: the animal is to be “roasted” (v. 8, not boiled), and it is to be completely consumed (v. 10): a perfect (“without blemish”, v. 5) and complete sacrifice. When eating it, the people are to be ready to travel (v. 11) and it shall be eaten “hurriedly” – but also (per another translation) *in trepidation*. In v. 12, God will do to the Egyptians more than what Pharaoh tried to do to the Israelites: “strike down every firstborn”, male and female. The people are to “celebrate it as a festival to the Lord” (v. 14), and also as a pilgrimage. This is the origin of Passover, the commemoration of how God rescued his chosen people. Easter, too, is an event of rescue: God rescues us from sin. In vv. 29-32, God brings the tenth plague on the Egyptians, killing all their eldest children. The Pharaoh has had enough: he says “Rise up, go away from my people ... Go, worship the LORD ... And bring a blessing on me too!” God has made his point. In v. 37ff, the Exodus begins.

Psalm 149

NRSV

This psalm was used in a liturgical setting: note “assembly of the faithful”. Worshipers are invited to sing “a new song”, perhaps *new* because God continually reveals more of himself to the faithful. V. 3 tells us that hymns were accompanied by “dancing”, the “tambourine” and the “lyre”. Praise him because he delights in his people and gives victory (in some sense) to those who hold him in awe. (In v. 5 “glory” is a divine title.) May “the faithful” even “sing for joy” in their homes (“on their couches”). Vv. 6-9 appear to be a call to battle, to a holy war: may God’s people execute on “nations” (v. 7) and “peoples” the “judgement decreed” (v. 9) by God.

Romans 13:8-14

NRSV

In vv. 1-7, Paul has written about the obligations we Christians have to civil au-

thorities; he now continues his instructions on ethics for Christians. The only thing we Christians should “owe” (v. 8) others – Christians and non-Christians – is love: this sums up the obligations of the Christian in life. But as Christians, love is *part of the deal* rather than an *obligation*, and can never be completely discharged. Love among Christians is something special: it is mutual.

Then vv. 9-10: if we love our neighbours, we will treat them as the Ten Commandments (“the law”) requires: this flows naturally out of our love for them, e.g. we will not offend them by adulterous behaviour. This is why “one who loves another ... [fully satisfies] the law” (v. 8).

In v. 11, Paul tells us another reason why ethical behaviour is important for Christians. We know that we are living both in the present and in the age which is after the first coming of the Messiah and before the second: “salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers”. Paul expresses it in terms of night and day: we should awake, pass from darkness to light, from evil to good. The image of armour is also found in Jewish contemporary writings about the end of the age; in 1 Thessalonians 5:8, Paul tells us that the “armour of light” (v. 12) is faith, hope, charity, fidelity, uprightness, etc. “Let us live” (v. 13), he says, as if the Day of the Lord is already here, “honourably”, not in ways that harm ourselves and our neighbours. Rather, let Christ be our armour, and let us not give in to the temptations of the flesh. (In baptism, we have already “put on”, v. 14, Christ, but life in Christ is something that grows with experience. As we grow in the faith, we are more and more able to resist sinful opportunities.)

Matthew 18:15-20

NRSV

Jesus has just told the parable of the lost sheep. When one sheep gets lost, he says, doesn’t the shepherd “go in search of the one that went astray?” (v. 12). And, if he finds it, doesn’t he *rejoice* “over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray?” (v. 13).

So, in the church, how should a “member” (v. 15) who has *strayed*, i.e. sinned, be treated? First, try taking him (or her) aside and “point out the fault” to him. Do not humiliate him by having others present. But if he doesn’t listen, face him with his misdemeanour before a few witnesses. Sharing the reproof adds weight to it. If the person still refuses to listen, bring the matter before the whole assembly of the (local) church. If “the offender refuses to listen even to the church” (v. 17), consider the person an *unworthy outsider*: in Jewish parlance in Jesus’ time “a Gentile and a tax collector”. Expel him from the church (as Paul did at Corinth, where a man was living with his father’s wife.)

Then, in v. 18, Jesus broadens what he said earlier of Peter (16:19); “you” (the whole assembly) have the authority to “bind” (here, condemn) and to “loose” (here, acquit). Their decision will be ratified by God. Finally, in vv. 19-20, Jesus tells us that in common prayer, study, and in decision-making, however small the group, if we ask God for anything seeking to know his will and do it (“in my name”), he will do it, because Jesus, God the Son, is there in the community.