

Comments **Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost** **October 19, 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 33:12-23

NRSV

From vv. 7-11, we learn that Moses has pitched the tent of meeting, a place where people could seek God, outside the camp. “the LORD used to speak to Moses ... as one speaks to a friend” (v. 11). The golden calf incident has driven a wedge between God and his people; they feel separated from God. Now Moses asks: God, you have told me to lead the people (they were *brought out* of Egypt), but whom will you “send with me” (v. 12), as a sign of your presence? Our relationship is mutual: I know you and I acknowledge you. Israel is “your people” (v. 13) as well as mine (even if they are disobedient.) In another translation, v. 14 is a question: God asks, if my presence were to go with you, would it make you rest easy? Moses answers (v. 15): if you will not be present with us, why did you bring us out here into the desert? How will it be known that you are with us? (v. 16) By being with us, we will be your elect (“distinct”, v. 16) people, chosen over other peoples. Moses receives assurance that God will guide Israel (v. 17), because of the special relationship between him and their leader.

Moses now seeks to know God better, something closer than friendship, i.e. to see his very glory (v. 18). God does promise him “goodness” (v. 19) and grace (“gracious”), but God chooses to whom he reveals himself (“show mercy ...”) Moses cannot possibly see God’s face: to ancient peoples, to see a god’s face was to invite death. Even so, God does grant him more knowledge than that he gives to others: he will see his “back” (v. 23) but not his face. In Chapter 34, God makes a new pact with the people.

Psalms 99

NRSV

This is a hymn of praise to God as king. The endings of Vv. 3, 5 and 9 are perhaps a refrain, said or sung by worshippers as they “extol” (v. 9) God. God, on his throne above the “cherubim” (v. 1, the half-human, half-animal creatures thought to hover above the altar) in the Temple, is to be praised by “all the peoples” (v. 2). V. 4 lists some qualities God has shown “Jacob”, the people of Israel. His “footstool”, v. 5, is the Ark. For Israel, God has also: (1) helped people in need (vv. 6, 8); (2) given them just laws (v. 7); and (3) punished and forgiven them where appropriate (v. 8). “Moses ... Aaron” (v. 6) and “Samuel” were known for communicating with God and were his representatives. “His holy mountain” (v. 9) is Mount Zion, the hill on which Jerusalem stands.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

NRSV

This letter opens as did private letters of the time. Paul states that it is from him and two associates (although he is actually the author). Silvanus is the Gentile name of Silas, the person who brought to Antioch the Jerusalem Council’s deci-

sion that Gentile Christians were not required to observe Jewish cultural/religious practices. The word translated “church” here can mean any assembly, so Paul makes it clear: the letter is to the community at Thessalonica which believes in God as Father and holds the Christ (messiah) to be his Son, Jesus. A letter began with a greeting, and Paul uses his usual one: “Grace to you and peace”.

Paul launches into brotherly affection: he and those with him remember the members of the church in their prayers, thankful for their “work of faith” (v. 3), their wholehearted assent to God and his plan for salvation, for their “labour of love”, their hard work of active caring for others, and their “steadfastness of hope”, their patient endurance of all suffering in the hope of salvation. (English has no adequate translation for the words he uses.) This is happening, he says, because God has “chosen you” (v. 4): they have embraced the good news not only intellectually (“in word only”, v. 5) but also in divine action: working abundantly (“with full conviction”) aided by the Holy Spirit. Further, he and his companions found their conversion efforts among them highly effective. The Thessalonians have become “imitators” (v. 6) of Paul and of Christ, being joyful in spite of persecution; they have become examples for others to imitate throughout the province (“Macedonia”, v. 7) and elsewhere. People know how they were converted from worshipping false gods represented by “idols” (v. 9), gods who are lifeless and not what they seem to be – to worshipping “a living and true God”, to awaiting the second coming of Christ, whom God “raised from the dead” (v. 10), and who will rescue us from the “wrath”, the punishment at the end of time for those who oppose God’s ways.

Matthew 22:15-22

NRSV

Back in 21:23, as Jesus was teaching in the Temple, Jewish officials questioned his authority to do “these things”, all he has done in his earthly ministry. Jesus declined to answer the question, for the answer could only be understood by those with faith. Just before our reading, we find the parable of the Wedding Feast, which the Pharisees saw as an attack on them.

Now followers of the “Pharisees” (v. 15) and “Herodians” (v. 16, people who supported Herod, the Roman puppet king, and his successors) – united only in their desire to get rid of Jesus – speak to him. They appear to respect him, but speak with irony. And then the question, the subject of great debate in Jewish circles: should we pay the annual poll tax to Rome? (v. 17) Opinions varied: one group, the Zealots, claimed that God’s people should not be subject to pagan Gentiles. Jesus sees through their plot; he calls them “hypocrites” (v. 18) for pretending to respect him but intending to discredit him. If Jesus says *yes*, Zealots and other Jews hostile to Rome will turn against him; if he says *no*, he will risk arrest for inciting rebellion against Rome. We know his answer, as translated, but “Give” (v. 21) can be *give back* or *repay*. To Jews then and to us now, all we have is given to us by God; we owe everything to him. Jesus sidesteps another issue (vv. 20-22): the obverse side of the coin is inscribed *Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, great high priest* – an affront to his fellow monotheistic Jews.