

Comments **Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost** **November 5, 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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Joshua 3:7-17

NRSV

This book begins: "After the death of Moses ... the LORD spoke to Joshua, Moses' assistant, saying, ' ... proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land I am giving to them, the Israelites'". Spies have been dispatched to check on the enemy's defences. Reporting back to Joshua, they have told him: "Truly the LORD has given all the land in our hands; moreover all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before us" (2:24). Israel has camped on the east bank of the Jordan. The ark, carried by priests, will precede the people into the river. The people are to make themselves ritually pure ("Sanctify yourselves", v. 5).

In v. 7, God tells Joshua that he will give a sign to show the people that God will be with him as he was with Moses. Joshua is to give the order to the priests (v. 8); he tells the people that what they will see will show that God is with them, and that he will be victorious (through them) over the present inhabitants of the Land. (The "Canaanites", v. 10, were native to Palestine; the "Hittites" had spread from Asia Minor; the "Jebusites" inhabited Jerusalem; nothing is known of the other peoples.) V. 12 seems out of place, being part of the preparation for the erection of a victory cairn at Gilgal. The word translated "heap" (vv. 13, 16) is the one used in the story of the crossing of the Reed (or Red) Sea.

The action begins in v. 14. For much of the year, the Jordan is little more than a stream, but at the "time of harvest" (v. 15, April to May), it is in full flood, carrying melt waters from mountains to the north. The waters are blocked at "Adam" (v. 16), 30 kilometres (20 miles) to the north. This does happen occasionally; the last time was in 1927. (The Jordan and the Dead Sea are in the "Arabah" plain.) It seems that the people passed the ark as they crossed the river; then the priests carried the ark to the western bank. The scene is more like a liturgical procession than a military tactic! This story is the beginning of how God's people triumph over pagan peoples and come to be the dominant people in Palestine.

Psalms 107:1-7,33-37

NRSV

As it now exists, this psalm is a group thanksgiving, perhaps sung by pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem to celebrate a festival. They thank God for escape from various dangers. The psalm has two refrains: for the first stanza, vv. 6 & 8. V. 1 is a summons to praise. The themes of *redemption* and *gathering* suggest that vv. 2-3 were written after the Exile; they may have been added (with vv. 33-43) to change the psalm from an individual thanksgiving to one suited to communal use. V. 3 pictures the people as coming from all points of the compass, although most came from the east (Babylon). Vv. 4-9 tell of the Israelites wandering in the desert during the Exodus. When they were "hungry and thirsty", physically and spiritually, God came to their aid. The next four stanzas also tell of God's help to them

in troubled times; the pilgrims thank him for his fidelity to the covenant he made at Sinai. Vv. 33-43 are part of a hymn praising God for his bounty. While he treats the ungodly harshly, he gives richly to those who follow his ways (vv. 33-37). May godly people, people who know God (the "wise", v. 43) recall God's actions on behalf of his people, his loyalty to the covenant ("steadfast love").

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

NRSV

Paul continues his defence of his *techniques* in founding the Thessalonian church. In v. 9, he reminds his readers that he (and perhaps Silvanus and Timothy) worked strenuously while with them, probably dividing his time between his trade (tent-making) and proclaiming the gospel. (Every Jew learnt a trade.) He did not impose on them. Both they and God are "witnesses" (v. 10) to the interior goodness and fidelity to God ("pure"), propriety ("upright") and freedom from sin ("blameless") in their conduct towards the converts. Back in v. 7, he spoke of *nourishing* them as a mother nourishes her baby; now (v. 11) he speaks of the father's role: a father *instructs*. He appealed to them ("urging", v. 12), encouraged them, and pleaded with them – to walk in God's ways ("lead ..."), who calls them to share in the new order, now and at the end of time.

In 1:5, Paul has said that "our message ... came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit ...". Now he gives thanks for this: that they understood the good news not on his authority (as his), nor effective through him, "but as what it really is, God's word" (v. 13), made active in those who believe.

Matthew 23:1-12

NRSV

Jesus has just silenced his principal critics, the Sadducees and the Pharisees, by showing their lack of understanding of parts of the Old Testament. He now speaks "to the crowds and to his disciples". (Most "scribes", v. 2, were Pharisees. They made copies of the Mosaic law; they taught and applied it and the aural tradition that had grown up around it, considering the latter to be as binding as the Law.)

Jesus tells his audience (v. 2): the Pharisees have authority to teach the Law, in (what was considered) an unbroken chain back to Moses ("Moses' seat"), so honour their teachings, but beware of their practices! They are great ones for teaching a severe (rather than humane) interpretation of the Law ("heavy burdens", v. 4) and not following it themselves! They are vain and hypocritical (v. 5): they exert effort to appear pious. ("Phylacteries" are small boxes containing biblical texts, worn on the arm or the forehead; "fringes" are prescribed in Numbers and Deuteronomy as a way of remembering to live by the commandments. The longer the fringes, the more pious the wearer appears to be.) Vv. 6-7 give four examples of vanity. ("Rabbi" means *master* and later became a title for a synagogue leader.) Then vv. 8-10: Christians are not to use honorific titles. Jesus is our one "teacher" and *instructor* for we are his lifelong disciples; others teach us only for a time. God the "Father" is our father. Vv. 11-12 emphasize the importance of humility and service to others.