Comments **Seventh Sunday after Pentecost** **July 11, 2021**

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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2 Samuel 6:1-5,12b-19 NRSV

With God's help, David has won battles over the Philistines; but in one, they captured the Ark. While it was in their hands, the Philistines suffered a plague, likely bubonic, which they blamed on the Ark, and so returned it to Israel. The Israelites used the wood of the cart it arrived on as fuel for burning an offering. They moved the Ark to the "house of Abinadab" (v. 3) in "Baale-judah" (v. 2).

Now David and "all the people" (v. 2) process with the Ark "on a new cart" (v. 3), drawn by oxen, towards Jerusalem. The Ark is *of God* ("called ...", v. 2); it symbolizes God's presence among them. (The "cherubim" were winged figures guarding the holy object.) The procession is a happy one, but when "Uzzah" (v. 6) touches the Ark (perhaps to steady it.), God is angry because he touches a sacred object, and causes him to die. David becomes afraid of it (v. 9), and halts the procession, leaving it with "Obed-edom" (vv. 10, 12b). David still wishes to make Jerusalem the religious as well as political centre of the nation, so later the procession resumes (v. 12b). At this time, David, as king, can sacrifice (v. 13); later, only a priest could do so. An "ephod" (v. 14) was a light ceremonial garment, an apron, covering only the front of the body. Seeing David's behaviour, "Michal [his wife] ... despised him" (v. 16), probably because she is barren: Saul's line will not continue through David (v. 23). Other possible reasons for her loathing are: (1) she has been torn away from her first husband; (2) she has found herself one of many wives; (3) he wore only an ephod, so was almost nude (v. 20). The Ark is housed in a tent, as during the Exodus. David wishes to erect a permanent house for it, but it was Solomon who built the first Temple.

Psalm 24 NRSV

This psalm is based on a Canaanite myth which tells of the divine conquest of the unruly forces of chaos. The psalmist has transformed it into a hymn of praise to God, the victorious creator, followed by a liturgy on entering the Temple. In question-and-answer form, it was probably sung antiphonally, as the Ark was borne to the Temple. Vv. 1-2 acknowledge God as creator. V. 3 asks: who will be admitted to the Temple? Vv. 4-6 give the answer: those who are pure, do not worship false gods, and do not harm others with false oaths. They will be blessed by God, with prosperity. In vv. 7-10, the pilgrims identify God in terms traditionally associated with the Ark: he is "King of glory", the "Lord of hosts" (v. 10), the war hero of Israel (v. 8b). The "doors" (v. 9) are those between the outer court and the sanctuary of the Temple. Perhaps a priest asks: "Who is the King of glory?" (v. 8) from within, and the people answer from the court. (The "heads", v. 7, are the lintels of the doors.) God dwells in the sanctuary.

Ephesians 1:3-14 NRSV

Our reading begins immediately after Paul's greeting to his readers. "Blessed be ..." echoes Jewish and early Christian prayers. God has brought us, by way of Christ, "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places", blessings in our hearts which are unseen and eternal, which bring together the physical world and God, "just as" (v. 4, or *because*) (before time) he planned for Christ to come to us, for Christ's followers (us) to be holy, set apart for him, living "in love", for his followers (the church) to be made members of his family ("for adoption as his children", v. 5), and to be able to appreciate and reflect the Father's splendid gifts to us ("to the praise ...", v. 6). God gave this to us freely; it was his will and his "pleasure" (v. 5). (After Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven says "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you, I am well pleased.", Mark 1:11)

It is through Christ's death that we are set free, rescued ("redemption", v. 7) and forgiven our deviations from God's ways ("trespasses"). Being now "holy and blameless" (v. 4), we have intellectual knowledge of God ("wisdom", v. 8) and are able to apply it ("insight"); so we can know and participate in his plan for creation – which he disclosed in the *Christ-event* (Christ's life, death and resurrection.) This plan, which will come to fruition when God's eternal purposes are completed, is to unite ("gather", v. 10) all creation ("heaven" and "earth") in Christ. In Christ, we Christians have been adopted by God ("inheritance", v. 11), per his plan, so that we, forerunners ("the first", v. 12) of many to "set our hope on Christ", may live to praise God's manifest power ("glory"). In Christ, the recipients of this letter, having heard the gospel and believed in him, were baptised ("marked with the seal of the ... Holy Spirit", v. 13), incorporated into the Church. The inner sanctifying presence of the Spirit is a guarantee ("pledge", v. 14) that God will carry his promise to completion.

Mark 6:14-29 NRSV

Jesus' disciples have gone out, preached repentance, cast out demons, and cured many sick people but, while the crowds mill round him, the authorities are beginning to reject him. Some people think he is John the Baptist (now dead) working "powers", *miracles*. "But others" (v. 15) see Jesus' actions as signs of the end of the era: that he is "Elijah" (who was taken up to heaven, 2 Kings 2:11, and was expected to return at Judgement Day, Malachi 4:5), or a prophetic figure, or a prophet like Moses (promised in Sinai) – but not that he is the Messiah, also expected at that time. Herod's reaction is: *Not John back again!* (v. 16)

Mark inserts a flashback to the story of John the Baptist to tell what discipleship may cost; vv. 16-29 anticipate Jesus' fate, and that of some disciples. Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee, has had John arrested (v. 17) because he had denounced Herod for marrying his brother's wife (illegal per Leviticus 18:16; 20:21). Even so, because he found John fascinating ("liked to listen to him", v. 20) and recognized his worthiness, he did not wish him dead. But Herodias "wanted to kill him" (v. 19). The story of her *victory* is a horrifying tale. V. 29 foreshadows Jesus' burial in 15:45-46, but there his disciples desert him.