

Sunday between August 14 and 20 inclusive

Proper 15, Ordinary/Lectionary 20

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.
www.montreal.anglican.org/comments/ © Chris Haslam

Genesis 45:1-15

NRSV

Joseph has risen to power in Egypt. There is a famine in much of the Middle East, and Jacob (Israel) has sent ten of his sons to buy grain, but has kept Benjamin, son of his favourite wife and full brother of Joseph, at home. When they seek to buy grain, they are accused of spying; as surety that they will return with Benjamin, they must leave Simeon behind in Egypt. To lose Benjamin would break Jacob's heart, but the old man agrees to his heir joining his brothers on the second trek to Egypt. When they depart for home with the grain, Joseph has them arrested for stealing: he has had his silver cup placed in Benjamin's pack, where it is found, so Benjamin is detained. Judah pleads for Benjamin's release, saying that he expects Jacob to die if Benjamin fails to return home. And here our reading begins.

Joseph can no longer hide himself from his brothers. He dismisses his courtiers, to be alone with his family: this is a personal affair. He identifies himself (v. 3) and then (vv. 5-8) explains the theology behind what has happened to him: God has worked through his brothers. By selling him into slavery, he says, "God sent me before you to preserve life". God acts in history, through special people. It is Joseph's management of Egypt's grain stores that will keep Jacob's family (clan) alive through the famine. Israel, "a remnant on earth" (v. 7) will survive. God has even made Joseph "a father to Pharaoh" (v. 8), vizier or prime minister.

In v. 9, Joseph shows that he is eager to see his father again: "... do not delay". He offers them land in "Goshen" (v. 10), the fertile area east of the Nile delta. There they will be "near" (v. 10) him: this and other clues in this chapter place the story in time: the royal court was in lower Egypt during two periods; the Hyksos period (1720-1550 BC) fits this and other data in the story. Joseph forgives his brothers (v. 15).

Psalms 133

NRSV

This psalm is headed *A Song of Ascents*. Perhaps it was sung by pilgrims as they came together, journeying *up* to Jerusalem and *up* the steps of the Temple. It fits well with today's reading from Genesis, for it also speaks of brotherly love among the people of God. The pilgrims were probably from various tribes, and tribal differences were common. It is, says v. 2, like the anointing of the high priest; "Aaron" was the first one. The high priest's hair was saturated with oil (Exodus 29:7), signifying his total consecration to God. Mount "Hermon" (v. 3, west of Damascus) receives copious rain; for Jerusalem ("Zion") to receive as much would be true abundance. It is on Jerusalem that God has "ordained his blessing", i.e. he is the inexhaustible source of "life", "forevermore".

Romans 11:1-2a,29-32

NRSV

Paul has argued that Israel will not be saved at the Last Day. Most Jews have rejected the approach to oneness with God attainable through God's love. The fault for their alienation from God, he has written, lies with them. But he has hinted, based on Isaiah, that "a remnant of them will be saved" (9:27).

"Has God rejected his people?" (v. 1) No, says Paul: you can be a member of God's first chosen people, an "Israelite" and Christian: he is an example. So God has not totally cast off the people he chose long ago, even if they are at times disobedient to God's will. When God makes a promise, he keeps it: Israel is still chosen (v. 29). (Vv. 2b-24 speak of the waywardness of Israel. As in Elijah's time, there is now a faithful remnant, i.e. Jewish Christians. It was, he says, the failure of the mission to the Jews that led to the mission to the Gentiles. Gentile Christians will provide an example for Jews, leading them to seek oneness with him in faith.)

Now vv. 30-32: Gentile Christians ("you") were once unfaithful ("disobedient") to God but because they (Israel) were unfaithful, Gentiles have been brought to Christ. Their unfaithfulness has a purpose: that they may be brought back to God. "Disobedience" provides God with the opportunity to give his love ("mercy") to both Jews and Gentiles.

Matthew 15:(10-20),21-28

NRSV

Pharisees have come to Jesus asking why his disciples break the oral law, which they believe to be God-given and to have equal status with Mosaic Law: why do they not wash before eating? (v. 2) He has pointed out to them that at times they give priority to the oral law over the biblical Law. The Pharisees teach rules of human, rather than divine, origin.

Now (v. 10) he tells the crowd a "parable" (v. 15), a saying with a hidden meaning. He sees moral behaviour ("out of the mouth", v. 11) as important, not food laws ("into the mouth"). When the disciples point out that he has offended the Pharisees (v. 12) by his reply to their question, he is blunt: do not follow them; being "blind" (v. 14), they and their followers will be judged adversely ("pit"). When Peter asks for an explanation, Jesus addresses all the disciples ("you", v. 16, is plural). What is eaten, Jesus says, even though ritually clean, ends up unclean ("sewer", v. 17), so food laws are unimportant (in spite of being in the Law). The "mouth" (v. 18) was seen as the channel by which the "heart", the very being, expressed itself. Immoral behaviour ("evil intentions ...", v. 19) does alienate one from God ("defile", v. 20) but breaking laws of human origin does not.

Now a "Canaanite" (v. 22) woman, from Phoenicia ("Tyre ...", v. 21) and probably a Gentile, calls for help. She recognizes him as the Messiah ("Lord, Son of David", v. 22). Even though the disciples advise sending her away and Jesus says that his mission is to "Israel" (v. 24), she manages to kneel before him (v. 25). He tests her (v. 26): the "children" are Jews, their "food" the gospel, and "the dogs" the Gentiles. Her answer, that he can still help her, demonstrates her faith in him.