Comments **Year A**

Sunday between November 6 and 12 inclusive

Proper 27, Ordinary/Lectionary 32

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*

Joshua 24:1-3a,14-25 NRSV

The people of Israel are now residents of Canaan. According to this book, the conquest is complete. The land has been divided among the tribes. We leap forward to the final chapter of the book. The people (or their representatives) gather at Shechem, on the eastern edge of the hill country, some 50 km (30 miles) north of Jerusalem. Shechem was the site of a pagan shrine. Here Abraham built an altar to commemorate his meeting with God; here Jacob, returning from Haran, set up camp, bought land, and erected an altar; here Joseph was buried. Our reading describes a treaty between God and his people, in the general style of treaties between a victorious king and a vanquished people, *vassals*. Such treaties say: *in return for protecting you ..., you are obligated to ...* But what really matter to us are the *differences* from a typical treaty, what makes this an agreement between God and Israel.

In v. 2, God's titles are given. ("Terah" was Abraham's father, who "served other gods".) Vv. 2-13 is the *whereas* section: the background, the reason why the parties wish a treaty. V. 14 states Israel's obligations: "to revere the LORD ...". V. 22 speaks of witnesses, but (then and now) it is odd that the witnesses are parties to the agreement. This treaty, unlike others, is *light on the curses*: what will happen if either party breaks the oath; v. 20 says "if you forsake the LORD ..." But this verse is discordant with the rest of the reading and with Israel's experience during the Exile, so perhaps it was inserted later, as a lesson for people of a later age who were straying from worshipping God. V. 25 says that the treaty was *ratified*, together with subsidiary documents.

Vv. 14-20 are really separate from the treaty. The people have a free choice as to whether they worship God or the local gods, but Joshua and his household elect to serve God (v. 15). The people, recognizing all God has done for them, do choose to serve him. ("Beyond the River": the river is the Euphrates, so this refers to Aramea, the land to the north. The "Amorites", vv. 15, 18, appear to be an indigenous people of the Promised Land.)

Psalm 78:1-7 NRSV

This psalm, used at major festivals, tells the story of the people of Israel from the Exodus to the reign of David – as a way of teaching that God has continued his saving acts in history in spite of the unfaithfulness of his people. The Hebrew word translated "parable" (v. 2) has a wide meaning; here it means *wise* instruction – based not only on knowledge but also on long experience, of God's ways. It is important that coming generations know about God and his marvellous interventions in human affairs (his military "might", v. 4, and "wonders"); may his deeds of the past not be forgotten (v. 7); may all live by his Law.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 NRSV

Paul has just urged his readers to live a godly, ethical life "because the Lord is an avenger" (v. 6). When? According to Wisdom, the wicked will be punished at the Last Day. This brings up an important question ("we do not want you to be uninformed", v. 13, is Paul's way of saying *this is important*!): we know that the destiny of the faithful who are alive at the end of time is to be with God, but what about those who have already died?

We want you to understand, he says, about the faithful ("those") who have died (literally, *are asleep*), so that your grieving will be limited to what is natural upon the loss of a dear one; that you not share in the pagan belief that the dead are caught up in nothingness ("grieve as others do"). Christians have a certain hope: because we believe in the crucified and risen Christ, through him, God will bring those who are asleep into his company (v. 14). Those who are alive at the End will have no advantage over those who have died. (He includes himself among those who will still be alive.) Vv. 16-17 express a basic truth in terms of the cosmology of the day (with heaven above and the earth below): at the time of the second coming, God will descend, those who are already dead will rise, then we who are alive will ascend, joining those already dead. Thus we will all be with God for ever.

Matthew 25:1-13 NRSV

The foregoing verses (24:45-51) are a parable about a master who leaves his household for a time, and suddenly returns. If, while he is away, his servant lives a godly, ethical life, he is "blessed" when the master returns. On the other hand, if he, realizing that the master is delayed in returning, misbehaves and lives a life of debauchery, he will be condemned upon the master's return. In fact, he will be *caught in the act*, because the master will return when he least expects. Jesus is speaking in another way (in an allegory), about the relationship between how we live now and what our fate will be at the Second Coming; the master stands for Christ.

Our reading is also a parable about the end of time, the Second Coming. For the bridegroom to be "delayed" (v. 5) was normal at Jewish weddings, but vv. 10b-12 would be surprising to Jesus' audience. Each of the wise bridesmaids has made her preparation; she is prepared spiritually but preparedness cannot be transferred to others, so their refusal to give oil to the foolish bridesmaids may be intended to show that *each one of us* is expected to make our own preparation – by living a godly, ethical life. Two surprising events, the door being shut (v. 10) and the failing to recognize the foolish bridesmaids (v. 12), are probably another way of saying that the unprepared will be refused entry to the Kingdom – just as the wicked servant will be punished. We are to be prepared at all times for the end of the age, the Second Coming of Christ. (In v. 13, the Greek translated as "Keep awake" can be rendered as *be prepared*.)