

Sunday between August 7 and 13 inclusive

Proper 14, Ordinary/Lectionary 19

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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Genesis 37:1-4,12-28

NRSV

Jacob is the first of his line to call Canaan home. (His father, Isaac, now dead, saw himself as a foreigner living there.) Why do his brothers hate Joseph? (1) he tells tales ("bad report", v. 2) about them; (2) Jacob loves him more than the other sons, even to the extent of making him "a long robe with sleeves" (v. 3) or a *many-coloured coat* – such a robe was worn by royalty; and (3) Joseph has two dreams (vv. 5-11) which are interpreted as showing that his brothers and his parents will bow down to him.

In v. 13, Jacob ("Israel") sends Joseph to his brothers. When he reaches Shechem, they are nowhere to be seen; he is told that they have moved on to other pastures. When the brothers see him, they plot his death. They say "Here comes this dreamer." (v. 19) In the ancient world, dreams were believed to be divinely inspired, but to be only effective as long as the dreamer lived. Pits or cisterns, dug to store rain-water, were used as prisons; they were usually dry near the end of summer. (Jeremiah spent time in one when the king did not want to heed his advice.) The brothers intend deceit – something fairly common in Genesis. They intend to kill him, but Reuben wants no part of it (v. 21-22).

Vv. 25-27, and v. 28, tell two stories of how Joseph got to Egypt: in the hands of Ishmaelite nomads, and in those of "Midianite traders": two versions of the story were merged in Genesis. In the ancient view "blood" (v. 26) could not be *concealed*; being sacred to God, he would exact vengeance on those who spilled it. Judah (and Reuben, v. 22) knew this. (When Cain killed Abel, God caused him to quit farming and become nomadic.) This story is part of *salvation history*, of how God came to exercise his saving grace in the world, working through ordinary people – as may be seen in the psalm.

Psalms 105:1-6,16-22,45c

NRSV

In vv. 1-6 the people of Israel, God's people, the "offspring of ... Abraham" (v. 6), are invited, as they worship ("glory in his holy name", v. 3, and "seek the Lord"), to acknowledge all that God has done for them ("wonderful works", v. 5, "miracles", and "judgements") The psalm then tells biblical history, from the covenants with the patriarchs to entry into the Promised Land. Today's portion is about Joseph, sent by God to benefit humans. His dreams did indeed come true. The perspective is a particular one: God is the motivating force behind all of history. In vv. 16-17 "he" is God; in vv. 18ff, Joseph.

Romans 10:5-15

NRSV

Paul has written that Gentiles, without aiming to be one with God, have achieved oneness, while Israelites, who tried to be godly, failed to be so. Why? Because their approach was based on the Law and "works" (9:32) rather than faith. By *mangling* two verses from Isaiah, he has argued that God intended that they fail (9:33). He has prayed that they (whom he knows first-hand for their "zeal for God", v. 2) be included in God's salvation. They do not recognize the way humans are related to God: as now revealed in Christ; rather, they have taken their own path: through the Law. They have failed to realize that the Law *pointed forward* to Christ ("end", v. 4), in whom oneness with God is open to all.

Leviticus (thought to be written by "Moses", v. 5) says that the Law-based path to *life* requires *doing* it, practising it perfectly: which Paul has already shown is impossible. But in Deuteronomy 30, Moses argues for a faith-based approach ("on your lips and in your heart", v. 8) without excess of deeds ("ascend", v. 6, "descend", v. 7). In fact, Christ has *gone all the way* for you Israelites: he has come "down" (v. 6, been born into the world) and has been raised from "the dead" (v. 7). So "the word of faith" (v. 8) of which God's righteousness ("the righteousness", v. 6) speaks is the good news of Christ – that the way to salvation is through God's love. If you acknowledge "Jesus is Lord" (v. 9) and mean it, and believe that the Resurrection really happened, you will be saved and attain oneness with God ("justified", v. 10). ("Jesus is Lord", v. 9, is perhaps the earliest creed of the Church.)

As Isaiah wrote, belief in "him" (v. 11) is the key; Paul takes "him" to mean *Christ*. As Joel wrote (v. 13) all who ask will be saved. (Paul takes "'Lord'" as *Christ*.) But what of those Jews who did not heed Isaiah and Joel (v. 14), who neither believed, nor understood ("heard"), nor heard proclamation of Christ by one with authority ("sent", v. 15)? Paul insists (quoting Isaiah again), that they have heard the "good news", have had the opportunity to understand it, and have been properly proclaimed to, but they have declined belief – in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies (vv. 16-21).

Matthew 14:22-33

NRSV

This story is in a section on instructing the disciples about their mission. It is a story of miracles – there is no limit to what God can do – and of the power of faith: the disciples can do the seemingly impossible if they have sufficient faith.

Jesus has just fed the crowd, in the miracle of the loaves and fish. He compels the disciples to embark (v. 22); presumably the miracle has aroused popular enthusiasm – in terms of political freedom – rather than faith. Because the Sea of Galilee is shallow, storms arise rapidly. It was "early in the morning" (v. 25); from the Greek, we know it was before dawn. Walking on water was beyond the disciples' experience, so they are afraid that they are seeing a ghost. The three miracles are: Jesus walking on water, Peter doing the same, and the wind ceasing abruptly – that Matthew mentions it (v. 32) shows that he believed it to be a miracle. Jesus brings outward and inner calm, and a deeper faith. The disciples acknowledge him as "Son of God" (v. 33) for as God did at the time of creation, Jesus controls the waters, then believed to be chaotic and evil. Jesus is God's agent of renewal.