

Sunday between July 24 and 30 inclusive

Proper 12, Ordinary/Lectionary 17

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

Genesis 29:15-28

NRSV

After meeting God in a vision at Bethel, Jacob has journeyed on to Haran to find a wife of his own clan. He has come to a well (v. 2) covered by a stone so large that it takes several shepherds to move it. Perhaps to ensure equitable distribution of the water, the shepherds wait until all are there before rolling the stone away (v. 8). Rachel has arrived with her father Laban's sheep. As in other ancient stories, the hero (Jacob) has shown her his strength: by moving the stone unaided. Jacob has been taken with Rachel; Laban has "brought him to his house" (v. 13).

After staying with the family for a month, Laban asks Jacob what wages he expects (v. 15). V. 17 probably contrasts Leah and Rachel: the word translated as "lovely" can mean *dull-eyed*. Laban takes Jacob into his service ("stay with me", v. 19). "Seven years" (v. 20) indicates a long time, but for Jacob, besotted with Rachel, it passes rapidly. As Jacob has deceived Isaac, so Laban now fools Jacob. (That a bride was veiled makes this possible.) This time Jacob is "deceived" (v. 25). Isaac was duped into honouring "the younger before the firstborn" (v. 26). Laban does give Rachel to Jacob, but apparently without another "week" (v. 27) of marriage festivities – and after further years of service. Laban is as wily as Jacob! We are prepared for the birth of the fathers of the Israelite tribes: Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah" (v. 30) but Rachel was barren for a time (v. 31). Leah, "Zilpah" (v. 24) and "Bilhah" (v. 29) are the mothers of nine of them.

Psalms 105:1-11,45c

NRSV

This psalm, probably written for a major festival, recalls the events in Israel's history, from Abraham to the entry into the Promised Land, that show God's fidelity to his pacts and promises, culminating in the giving of the Law. Vv. 1-6 invite the people to worship, to joyous grateful recognition of God's deeds. He is to be remembered for his "judgements" (v. 5) as well as for his "wonderful works". His judgements are for all people (v. 7). He first promised the land to Abraham (v. 9), then confirmed it to Isaac and to Jacob, and finally made it part of an "everlasting covenant" (v. 10, Mosaic law) to Israel. Originally the psalm began as it ends; "Praise the Lord" (v. 45) is *Hallelujah* in Hebrew.

Romans 8:26-39

NRSV

Paul has written of the new way of being we attain in baptism: we are freed of compounding sin leading to the finality of death and begin living in and with the Spirit, thanks to God's gift of love. In this new life, we will live in complete accord with God, but now we still fail to live up to his (and our) expectations. We need help – help which the Spirit provides. In our present condition we have hope of attaining perfect union with God. Now he gives an example of how the Spirit

helps us. We have human limitations in how we pray; the Spirit "intercedes" in terms unexpressible in human language. The Father, who knows us to the core, knows the "mind of the Spirit" (v. 27) – for it is part of God's plan ("will") that he intercede for "the saints", the faithful. We know that, "for those who love God" (v. 28) and whom God has called as part of his plan, in his providence, the actions of "all things" converge towards ultimate goodness. God formulated his plan, that there would be people who would love him ("foreknew", v. 29). They would have a disposition to share increasingly in, and be moulded increasingly into, the risen life of Christ ("image", v. 29), so that they might join him in full godliness (glory) at the end of the era. These people he "called" (v. 30) and chose; they responded to his call, and he found them worthy ("justified"). So certain is Paul that God will complete the process that he writes "glorified" (past tense); in fact, sharing fully in God lies ahead.

He now examines in detail how certain can we be that God will complete the execution of his plan of salvation. What, he asks, "are we to say about these things" (v. 31), especially "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). He puts his questions in the language of the law court. God is so "for us" (v. 31) that he gave us his very Son, so he will surely follow through with the rest of his plan. God has passed a favourable sentence on us ("justifies", v. 33) so who is there to accuse us of anything? We have Christ, in his place of power and authority ("at the right hand of God", v. 34) pleading for us. (He is also the judge: see 2:16.) No hardship can separate the true Christian from Christ's love for us (v. 35). Psalm 44:22 foretold the sufferings of Christians (v. 36); in them we are winning a resounding victory ("more than conquerors", v. 37). Whether dead or alive at the Last Day, nothing – whether spiritual powers ("angels ... rulers ... powers", v. 38) or astrological powers (commonly believed to control human destiny, "height, nor depth", v. 39) or anything else – can separate us from God's love – and defeat God's purpose for us.

Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

NRSV

Jesus continues to use parables to teach the crowds and his disciples about God's Kingdom; the four read today are really similes. A "mustard seed" is very small; in Palestine it grows to be a large shrub, but hardly a tree. Birds do not nest in it, so Jesus exaggerates. Bread made with "three measures of flour" (v. 33) would feed 100 people: again an exaggeration. God's Kingdom will grow from small beginnings to significant size. Like yeast, Jesus' message will pervade the lives of many, transforming them. The "someone" of v. 44 stumbles over the "treasure" and acquires legal title to it by selling all to buy the field. Of such value is membership in the Kingdom. The "merchant" (v. 45) values the "pearl", (v. 46, the Kingdom), above all else. On the Sea of Galilee, a "net" (v. 47) gathered all fish, only some of which were edible. At the end of the age, God will come to judge people, declaring the good to be his and discarding the others. Jesus calls his disciples *scribes*, interpreters, "trained for the kingdom" (v. 52), when they tell him that they understand the seven parables in this chapter, for they know both the "old" (Israel's heritage), and the "new" understanding of it he has given them.