

Sunday between July 31 and August 6 inclusive

Proper 13, Ordinary/Lectionary 18

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

Genesis 32:22-31

NRSV

After serving Laban for many years, Jacob has decided to return home to Canaan. He has outwitted Laban into giving him the best of his flocks, and has departed with his wives and entourage without saying farewell. This has angered Laban, who has marched after Jacob, but (thanks to God's intervention), they have come to an amicable agreement.

In ancient folklore, struggles between humans and mysterious beings are common. Such beings, sometimes divine, often guard river crossings, and are only effective at night. The being is usually forced to reveal something of himself. This is such a story – but much more. Jabbok is little more than a stream, but it runs in a deep, mysterious gorge. The supernatural event can have no witnesses (“Jacob was left alone”, v. 24.) The struggle appears to be with “a man”, but in v. 26, Jacob probably recognizes him as God: he seeks his blessing. This is confirmed in v. 28: “you have striven with God”. Jacob's life has been a struggle, from his birth on. He does not win a complete victory: his “hip was put out of joint” (v. 25). In v. 30, “Peniel” means *face of God*. We read in earlier chapters that God promised to preserve Jacob's life; here (v. 30) his “life is preserved”.

This story was handed down orally for many generations, and recorded by an author of Genesis much later. To this author, what really mattered was what it said about Israel, the nation: Jacob struggled with God, and he is given a new name (“Israel”, v. 28.) This change signifies a new era in Jacob's life; it gives meaning to his future life; he now has a mission. Jacob is no longer just cunning; he is now divinely commissioned Israel: he is father of God's chosen people. Just as he struggled with God, so does the nation. It too is protected by God, and God's people have a role in the path to salvation.

Psalm 17:1-7,15

NRSV

The psalmist prays for deliverance from accusers who behave deceitfully. May God show them that I am innocent (v. 2). “Visit me by night” (v. 3), when I am asleep and defenceless: you will find me godly in action and word; I keep the Law. I have always been peaceful, unlike “others” (v. 4); I have kept to God's ways (“paths”, v. 5) and never failed (“slipped”). I am sure that you will hear me; please do so now (v. 6). Show me the love and mercy (“steadfast love”, v. 7) implied in your covenant with Israel: you who, through your power (“right hand”) save those who “seek refuge” in you. Protect me as one who is precious (v. 8) from those who attack me (v. 9). They lack “pity” (v. 10) and are arrogant, thinking they do not need you. They try to “ambush” (v. 12) me. Please God, punish them and their “children” (vv. 13-14) eternally. I am confident that I am godly,

and so will be vindicated by seeing you in the Temple.

Romans 9:1-5

NRSV

Paul has written of the new way of being we have in Christ, in the love of God, aided by the Holy Spirit, with the certain hope of eternal life – while others continually alienate themselves from God and face the finality of physical death. We are adopted children of God, and so will attain complete oneness with him, sharing in his power (glory).

Now he confronts a worrying question: why have most Jews rejected the good news? This causes Paul, as a follower of Christ, great pain. Perhaps some thought him insensitive to the plight of his fellow Jews, but the “Holy Spirit”, within him, “confirms” that he really cares. He would even be willing to be “cut off from Christ” (v. 3), be condemned to damnation, for the sake of bringing his fellow Jews to Christ. They are “Israelites” (v. 4) – a title given to them by God. They have seven gifts from God: (1) “adoption”, being chosen as *children of God*; (2) “glory”, God's presence in the desert and in the Temple; (3) the “covenants” of God with the patriarchs; (4) “the giving of the law”, the expression of God's will at Sinai; (5) temple “worship”; (6) “the promises” to Adam, Noah, Moses and David; and (7) a heritage still in effect, of worshipping the God of their fathers, “the patriarchs” (v. 5, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). There is an eighth gift, the greatest: Jesus, who was born a Jew. But they fail to recognize him for who he is: the “Messiah”, the Christ. Paul's basic answer is in vv. 6-18: God, not humans, chooses through whom he works to bring about his plan of salvation, as the Old Testament shows. God decided that the lineage of Israel, his people, would be through Isaac and Jacob, not through Ishmael and Esau.

Matthew 14:13-21

NRSV

Matthew has told us of the beheading of John the Baptist – killed because he denounced Herod Antipas' marriage to his brother Philip's wife when Philip was still alive (a violation of Jewish law).

This is a story of a miracle, but which miracle? The obvious answer is the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, but there is perhaps another miracle here. Matthew places this story in a section of the gospel about training the disciples for their mission, so perhaps Jesus is teaching them about what they can do. (A peasant in Palestine, then and now, travelled with food.) Jesus says to his disciples “you give them something to eat” (v. 16). He is saying: you have the resources to solve this problem! Take the initiative! Be leaders!

In v. 19, we have a reminder of the Last Supper, the eucharistic feast, and of the messianic feast at the end of time. Jesus *takes* bread, recognizes it as the Father's gift (“looked up to heaven”), *blesses* it, *breaks* it, and *gives* it, distributes it. Then, in v. 20, we see another level to the story. The disciples get everyone to work together to a common purpose. All are “filled” and much is left over: a basket for each disciple. Each of them has a mission to perform, one of telling the good news of the infinite abundance of God's love, which all can *eat*.