

Sunday between October 9 and 15 inclusive

Proper 23, Ordinary/Lectionary 28

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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Exodus 32:1-14

NRSV

The people of Israel have received the Ten Commandments verbally, but Moses is still up on Mount Sinai receiving them in writing. To the people, he is “delayed” (or *shamefully late*, per another translation). They ask Aaron to “make gods”, thus breaking the first (and second) Commandments. Why is “gods” plural? Either Aaron compromises by only making one calf, or (more likely) the story as handed down orally mentioned only one. Then, when it was written down, the plural was used. But why? After Solomon’s death (in 930 BC), Israel split into two kingdoms. To avoid people visiting Jerusalem (which was in the south), the king of the northern kingdom, Jeroboam, had two golden calves made, and had one set up at each of two alternative places of worship (see 1 Kings 12:28-30). The writer had two objectives (which to us conflict here): (1) to record history, and (2) to teach that Jerusalem was the only proper centre of worship. In our reading, the people willfully rebel against God. (Modern Jewish translations consider *Elohim*, *god* or “gods”, to be singular, thus implying that Judaism has always been monotheistic.)

In v. 7, by telling Moses that Israel is “your” people, God threatens Israel. He says that they have “acted perversely” or *succumbed to moral decay*. (The word translated “revel” in v. 6 has connotations of immorality.) God threatens his “wrath” (v. 10); he even offers to make Moses the founder of a new “great nation”. But Moses does not give in to this temptation; rather he stands by Israel. He pleads with God: you have looked after us so far, so why quit now? Won’t the Egyptians be able to claim that you are evil: that you led the people of Israel out into the desert in order to kill them? (v. 12) Please God, don’t go back on your promises to the patriarchs!

In v. 14, God does *change* “his mind” or *lets himself be sorry*, but in vv. 15-35 Moses gets angry with the people, smashes the law tablets, burns and grinds up the calf, and makes the people drink water polluted with the resulting gold powder. Aaron offers a weak excuse for his actions (the people made me do it; the fire formed the gold into a calf) and the Levites, as ordered by God through Moses, put some of the people to death, as punishment. Moses wins pardon for the people, but God punishes all with a plague.

Psalms 106:1-6, 19-23

NRSV

This psalm begins as a summons to praise God for his goodness and compassion (“steadfast love”). How can humans adequately praise the “mighty doings” (v. 2) of God? Only the person who is just and righteous can do this (v. 3). May God, when he restores “prosperity” (v. 5) to Israel, include me in his act of deliverance.

I will then share in rejoicing in his deeds of help to his “chosen ones” (Israel) in the past. The people have sinned as their ancestors did (v. 6). Vv. 7-47 recall the ways in which the people of Israel failed to live up to their pact with God during the Exodus. V. 19 tells the sorry tale of making of the “calf” image at “Horeb”, i.e. Mount Sinai. They worshipped this image, one of “an ox that eats grass” (v. 20), i.e. a bull. (The “land of Ham”, v. 22, is Egypt.) Moses succeeded in convincing God not to be angry, to refrain from destroying them. The psalm ends (v. 48) by praising God, Israel’s god through all ages.

Philippians 4:1-9

NRSV

Paul began the conclusion to the letter back in 3:1a. After a digression – to warn against heresy and self-indulgence and to urge devotion to Christ – he tries to finish the letter, but certain concerns intrude. It seems that “Euodia” (v. 2) and “Synychte”, two workers for Christ at Philippi, differ in their understanding of what the way of Christ is, and that this is causing disunity in the community. We do not know to whom Paul refers as his “loyal companion” (v. 3); he is asked to be instrumental in achieving reconciliation. We read of “Clement” nowhere else. The idea that God keeps a “book of life”, a roll of the faithful to be opened at the end of time, is also found in Exodus 32:32 and Psalm 69:28; in Luke 10:20, Jesus bids his disciples to “rejoice that ... [their] names are written in heaven”. V. 4 is the conventional Greek salutation (like our *goodbye*) but here Paul means “rejoice” literally. He expects the Second Coming soon: “The Lord is near” (v. 5). Then v. 6: rather than worrying on their own, the Philippians should ask God to help them, through prayer, both of “supplication” (petition) and of “thanksgiving”. God’s peace will protect them against their own failings and external threats. The virtues Paul exhorts his followers to pursue in v. 8 are those for which any Greek was expected to strive: he urges moral uprightness to all who follow Christ.

Matthew 22:1-14

NRSV

This is the third parable about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus’ audience would naturally associate a festive meal with the celebration of God’s people at the end of time. This story has elements of harshness and tragedy; some responses seem disproportionate to the *crime*. It was the custom for the host to *send* “his slaves” (v. 3) to invite the guests, and again to tell them when dinner was ready; preparing a banquet took many hours. To refuse to come, to refuse a king’s command, is treason; to kill his slaves (v. 6) amounts to insurrection, so the king sends troops to put down the rebellion. After those whom the king had chosen refuse to come, he invites all people, “both good and bad” (v. 10). (In Jesus’ day tax collectors were considered “bad”.) One guest is ill-prepared for the banquet (v. 11); the king banishes him to torment.

We recognize the king as God. The first guests are those who are hostile to Jesus; the one without the wedding robe represents those who do not count the cost in becoming disciples. The judgement on anyone who does not prepare will be at least as severe as that on those who reject Christ. The final verse is the moral of the story – a generalization of Jesus’ intent in telling the parable.