

Sunday between August 21 and 27 inclusive

Proper 16, Ordinary/Lectionary 21

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 1:8-2:10

NRSV

The book of Exodus is, in some ways, a continuation of Genesis. Exodus begins "These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his own household: ... Then Joseph died ..., and that whole generation" (1:1, 6). The people of Israel have multiplied, as God promised to Abraham, so much so that the Pharaoh has developed paranoid fears about being overwhelmed by the strangers. So the Pharaoh (probably Seti I, 1309-1290 BC) forces them into slave labour, especially in the construction of buildings, including store houses ("supply cities", 1:11). Even so, the people of Israel "multiplied and spread" (1:12), probably beyond lower Egypt, in spite of crushing labour. The Pharaoh tries another tactic: having the Hebrew midwives kill male babies. But the midwives are in awe of ("feared", 1:17) God; they give as their excuse that the Hebrew women are so "vigorous" (v. 19) that they give birth before the midwives arrive. So the Pharaoh appeals to "all his people" (1:22, the Egyptians): throw the boys into the Nile!

The story of Moses begins in 2:1. He is of Levite stock. The Hebrew word translated "basket" (2:3) literally means *little ark*: a reminder that just as God saved Noah, he will save Moses and the Israelites. The basket, constructed like a Nile boat of the time (for "papyrus" floats), is placed "among the reeds", foreshadowing the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. The "daughter of Pharaoh" (2:5) recognizes Moses as Hebrew because only Hebrews were desperate enough to try such a crazy scheme for preserving life. Moses' "sister" (2:7) watches nearby. In Egyptian, *Mose*, meaning *son of*, was often part of a name, (e.g. Tut-mose, *son of Tut*), but in Hebrew, it means *he who pulls out*. Perhaps the princess knows a little Hebrew (2:10). So Moses is brought up Egyptian, but (in 2:11-13) he shows that he is Hebrew at heart: he kills an Egyptian who is fatally beating a Hebrew, "one of his kinsfolk".

Psalms 124

NRSV

"If it had not been the Lord who was on our side ...", look what would have happened to us! Our enemies would have "swallowed us up" (v. 3) and the "flood would have swept us away" (v. 4) – water was always considered uncertain in ancient times. Then, vv. 6-8: because God was on our side, he has delivered Israel from being like a "bird", caught up in the net of the hunter ("the snare of the fowlers"). God has helped us, and does help us now!

Romans 12:1-8

NRSV

V. 1 can be paraphrased as: I have been telling you about "the mercies of God" in the preceding chapters; therefore be obedient to God's will: present yourselves as

a "sacrifice" (as in the sacrifice of animals in the Temple, i.e. completely), but one that lives: this is your worship of God; it involves your very being. We are, Paul says in v. 2, to be "transformed" by adopting a new *mind set*, in order to recognize God's will for us, by discerning that which is "good, ... acceptable [to him] and perfect" – rather than giving in (*conforming*) to the way of thinking in the world around us. We are to adopt a new starting point in our thinking.

How? Because, through the authority and grace given to him by God, Paul insists that we should think of ourselves and use the gifts God has given us, as God has "assigned" (v. 3) to us – not as we or the world consider these gifts. All of us are members of the body of Christ, and each has particular gifts. Together we are "one body in Christ" (v. 5), and each is dependent on every other. For the benefit of the community, God has given us different gifts. If my gift is "prophecy" (v. 6, inspired preaching), prophesy to the extent that God has given me the ability; if "ministry" (v. 7, administration of material aid or distribution of alms), "teaching" (a distinct role in the early church), "exhortation" (v. 8, urging others to have faith), *giving*, or *leading*, do so properly. If my gift is being "compassionate" (v. 8), be so joyfully. Use the gifts God has given me, and restrict myself to these gifts. In the following verses, Paul illustrates various aspects of the general command of love.

Matthew 16:13-20

NRSV

Jesus has warned his disciples about religious leaders who can foretell the weather but "cannot interpret the signs of the times" (v. 3); they influence others, leading them astray. The only sign of the new era will be his resurrection ("sign of Jonah", v. 4). Beyond the reach of Herod Antipas' spies, he is free to talk. He asks his disciples: who do people say that I am? Herod thinks that he is "John the Baptist" (v. 14); "Elijah" was expected to return at the end of time; "Jeremiah" foretold rejection and suffering. Jesus is seen as a prophet, a spokesman for God. When Jesus asks the disciples the same question (v. 15), Peter has a vital insight, which "my Father" (v. 17), not humans ("flesh and blood"), has revealed to him.

Vv. 18-19 are particularly thorny, for they are overloaded with the issue of papal authority; I seek to avoid this issue. It is clear that: (1) if Jesus spoke in Aramaic, "Peter" and "rock" are both *cephas*; (2) in Greek, the words are *petros* and *petra*, so there may be word-play; (3) Jesus switches from "Simon" (v. 17, the formal name) to "Peter" (v. 18, his nickname); (4) "Hades" was the place of the dead, so the "church" will survive Jesus' death; (5) in the Greek, "you" is singular throughout vv. 18-19; and (6) "bind" (v. 19) and "loose" are rabbinic terms for *forbid* and *permit* in a juridical sense – in 18:18-19 these powers are conferred on any two of the apostles. The "rock" (v. 18) may be (1) Peter's insight of Jesus as Christ ("Messiah", v. 16); (2) that God does reveal to church leaders; (3) Peter; or (4) the disciples (if Jesus paused after the second clause of v. 18). Jesus gives Peter "the keys" (v. 19), the ability to unlock the mysteries of the Kingdom; they may also be a symbol of authority over the Church. In v. 20, Jesus "sternly" orders the disciples to keep the insight quiet, lest people grasp it in a political way.