

Lectionary Readings: Exodus 4:27 – 5:1
 Psalm 116: (1-11) 12-19
 Hebrews 13: 16-21
 Luke 13: 10-17

A short reading from Exodus this week. Moses has met with the Lord in the wilderness as he goes to witness the burning bush that is not consumed. He has been called by God to go back to Egypt and confront Pharaoh on behalf of the enslaved Israelite people.

Between the OT reading for last week (the account of the burning bush) and the reading above, Moses has argued with God that he is unsuitable to go to Pharaoh. His final argument that he is ineloquent exasperates the Lord who declares that Moses' brother Aaron will go with him and be the person who proclaims the Word given by the Lord.

Today, we find the Lord instructing Aaron to link up with Moses, which he does – meeting him in the wilderness at 'the mountain of God'. Moses explains what the Lord has told him and also the signs he is able to perform.

We find Moses and Aaron assembling all the elders of the Israelites. They are convinced, believe, and worship the Lord when Aaron speaks to them and Moses performs the signs he has been given; first, transforming his staff into a snake and back to a staff; second, the sign that turned his hand leprous when put inside his cloak – changing back to normal when placed again inside the cloak - and finally turning water from the Nile into blood when poured on the ground.

The reading ends with Exodus 5 verse 1. It is a passage with the NIV heading **“Bricks without straw”**. Moses and Aaron, having won over the Israelite leaders (and presumably, through them, the people) go and confront Pharaoh. The message delivered is simple:

This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: “Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness.”

We do not, and will not read in subsequent weeks, the conflict between Moses and Pharaoh and how conditions for the Israelite slaves were made even more arduous.

Moses had been warned, by the Lord, that Pharaoh would not let the people go willingly. Immediately after the account of the burning bush we read: (Exodus 4: 18-23)

Moses returns to Egypt

¹⁸ Then Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, ‘Let me return to my own people in Egypt to see if any of them are still alive.’

Jethro said, ‘Go, and I wish you well.’

¹⁹ Now the LORD had said to Moses in Midian, ‘Go back to Egypt, for all those who wanted to kill you are dead.’

²⁰ So Moses took his wife and sons, put them on a donkey and started back to Egypt. And he took the staff of God in his hand.

²¹ **The LORD said to Moses, ‘When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do.**

But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.

²² **Then say to Pharaoh, “This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son,²³ and I told you, ‘Let my son go, so that he may worship me.’**

But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.”

Next week we move forward to Exodus 12 and the instructions for protecting the houses of God's people on the night of “the Passover”.

As we read of these demonstrations of the Power of the Lord it is surprising to remember how often the whole people of Israel turned from Him and grumbled about the conditions in which they found themselves. It was only a matter of days after crossing the Red Sea and leaving Egypt that they started complaining – wishing themselves back in Egypt!

How do we view our situation? The promise for a Christian life is not one of ease and plenty – but it is a promise that God is with us, protecting us, guiding us etc. providing we are listening for His voice.

Today we read the second half of Psalm 116; described in the NIV Study Bible as:

Praise of the Lord for deliverance from death. It may have been written by a king; its language echoes many of the psalms of David.

The NIV Bible Commentary tells us that this psalm is the fourth of the six “Egyptian Hallel Psalms” (113-118). The Hallel psalms had a significant part in the “praise” of the Lord. The Egyptian Hallel received a special place in the Passover liturgy – 113-114 being recited or sung before and 115-118 after the meal itself.

Psalm 116 can be classified as an *individual thanksgiving* hymn.

The first part of the psalm tells of the Lord's action for the writer when he calls out for help:

- ¹ I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.
² Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.
³ The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me; I was overcome by distress and sorrow.
⁴ Then I called on the name of the LORD:
 'LORD, save me!'
⁵ The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.
⁶ The LORD protects the unwary; when I was brought low, he saved me.
⁷ Return to your rest, my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.
⁸ For you, LORD, have delivered me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, ⁹ that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living.
¹⁰ I trusted in the LORD when I said, 'I am greatly afflicted'; ¹¹ in my alarm I said, 'Everyone is a liar.'

The writer, having called out to the Lord and experienced the deliverance he desires now turns his attention to what he can do in return – our reading today:

- ¹² **What shall I return to the LORD for all his goodness to me?**
¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.
¹⁴ I will fulfil my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.
¹⁵ Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful servants.
¹⁶ Truly I am your servant, LORD; I serve you just as my mother did; you have freed me from my chains.
¹⁷ I will sacrifice a thank-offering to you and call on the name of the LORD.
¹⁸ I will fulfil my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, ¹⁹ in the courts of the house of the LORD – in your midst, Jerusalem.
 Praise the LORD.

Verse 12 above reminds us of words written by Charles Wesley:

**What shall I do my God to love,
my Saviour, and the world's, to praise?**

Whose tenderest compassions move
to me and all the fallen race,
whose mercy is divinely free
for all the fallen race, and me!

I long to know, and to make known,
the heights and depths of love divine,
the kindness thou to me hast shown,
whose every sin was counted thine:
my God for me resigned his breath;
he died to save my soul from death.

How shall I thank thee for the grace
on me and all the world bestowed?
O that my every breath were praise!
O that my heart were filled with God!
My heart would then with love o'erflow,
and all my life thy glory show.

The reading from Hebrews continues the theme from Psalm 116 (What shall I return to the LORD for all his goodness to me?) and of Charles Wesley (What shall I do my God to love?). In Hebrews 13: 16 we read:

- ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

We are reminded of the Great Commandment, found in the Old Testament but given new dimensions by Jesus – to Love God as much as we able and to love our neighbours **as we love ourselves**.

The author of Hebrews goes on to give an interesting insight into life and position within the early Christian church:

- ¹⁷ Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.

The author then requests prayer for the leaders:

- ¹⁸ Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably in every way.

“The Message” amplifies this verse:

Pray for us. We have no doubts about what we're doing or why, but it's hard going and we need your prayers. All we care about is living well before God.

There is an almost ‘circular’ argument here – pray for the leaders, it is hard going for them; they have clear consciences about the lives they live, desiring to be the best they can be.

Having prayed for the leaders and their ministry – have confidence in them and submit to their authority. They are responsible for the “flock” and will be called to account for their actions. The Hebrew Christians are urged to live under this authority in a way that will make it a joy for their leaders, not a burden on their ministry.

I wonder how many modern congregations would be advised to read and mark these verses.

Around the late 1820s an anonymous two line chorus came into circulation and was subsequently printed in two hymn books:

Let sects and names and parties fall
And Jesus Christ be All in All.

From about 400 to 1600 AD, Hebrews was known as “The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews”, but since the Reformation it has been widely recognised that Paul could not have been the writer. The NIV Study Bible, in its introduction to the letter comments:

There is no disharmony between the teaching of Hebrews and that of Paul’s letters, but the specific emphases and writing styles are markedly different. Contrary to Paul’s usual practice, the author of Hebrews nowhere identifies himself in the letter – except to indicate that he was a man (“to tell” in 11:32 translates the **masculine** form of a Greek verb, indicating the author was male).

Moreover, the statement “*This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him*” (2:3), indicates that the author had neither been with Jesus during his earthly ministry nor received special revelation directly from the risen Lord, as had Paul (Galatians 1: 11-12).

The question of authorship was touched on five weeks ago in these Lectionary Thoughts.

Whoever wrote Hebrews was clearly known to the recipients of the letter as he makes the request that they pray for him to be restored to them. Was this one of the reasons that many in the early church thought Paul had written the letter? Unlike Paul, he was not under arrest – this is seen in verse 23 where Timothy has been released from imprisonment and the author says:

..... **if he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you.**

Our reading ends at verse 21 – this and the preceding verse are headed in the NIV as “**Benediction and final greetings**”. They constitute a well known passage – often used at the close of a service. In the *Amplified Bible (Classic Edition)* these two verses are rendered:

²⁰ Now may the God of peace [Who is the Author and the Giver of peace], Who brought again from among the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood [that sealed, ratified] the everlasting agreement (covenant, testament),

²¹ Strengthen (complete, perfect) *and* make you what you ought to be *and* equip you with everything good that you may carry out His will; [while He Himself] works in you *and* accomplishes that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ (the Messiah); to Whom be the glory forever and ever (to the ages of the ages). Amen (so be it).

The Gospel reading from Luke is the well-known account of Jesus confronting the Jewish authorities in a synagogue on the Sabbath. No other Gospel appears to have recorded this particular occasion.

Teaching was permitted on the Sabbath – there were no objections when that was all Jesus was doing. They came when He called the ‘crippled’ woman forward and healed her. Healing probably came under the category of work (v.14) – at least it was an activity not permitted on the Sabbath; we note the synagogue leader saying there are six days for work, come and be healed on one of them.

Jesus describes the architects of the Jewish Law as “Hypocrites” – they are quite happy to do things on the Sabbath which others would see as work; e.g. taking an animal out from the stable and leading it to a place where it could drink. When you think about it, this was an ‘essential’ activity if the animals were to be looked after with care.

We see Jesus’ attitude to the Sabbath in another incident recorded in both Matthew and Mark, but it is the latter who has the most telling saying of Jesus: (Mark 2)

²³ One Sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some ears of corn.

²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?’

²⁵ He answered, ‘Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?’

²⁶ In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.’

²⁷ Then he said to them, ‘**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.**

²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.’

In Matthew's account of the confrontation in the cornfield there is additional material: (Matthew 12)

- ¹At that time Jesus went through the cornfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some ears of corn and eat them.
- ²When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, 'Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.'
- ³He answered, 'Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?'
- ⁴He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread – which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests.
- ⁵Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent?'
- ⁶I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.
- ⁷If you had known what these words mean, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," (*Hosea 6:6*) you would not have condemned the innocent.
- ⁸For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.'
- ⁹Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, ¹⁰and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?'
- ¹¹He said to them, 'If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?'
- ¹²How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! **Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.'**
- ¹³Then he said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.
- ¹⁴But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

*Unless the Lord builds the house
we labour in vain.
Unless the Lord lays the plans
we have no foundations.
Unless your will is in our hearts
we uselessly strive.
Come, Lord Jesus, build this house again.*

STF 515

We are a people whose life comes from you,
we were created with hearts meant to praise you,
you are beside us in all that we do,
but so often faith runs out,
hearts that should be praising, doubt,
Lord, remind us what we are about.

We are a family whose likeness is yours,
we were created with you as our Father,
we know you love us despite all our flaws,
but we make your kingdom wait,
with love that tends to hesitate;
make us brave, and let's fling wide the gates!

We need to carry your will in our heart,
we need your purpose as our aspiration,
we need your courage, each day a new start,
help us to see your people's needs,
breathe into our words and our deeds,
plant us your grain of mustard seed.

Jonathan Nowell

This is the day of rest,
to use as God intended:
time to renew our faith
and let our lives be mended;
time to fulfil our song
and time to rediscover
those to whom we belong,
and God who is our lover.

Here is the feast of life
to which we are invited;
here Jesus offers food
through which we are united:
food for a company
redeemed by blood and water,
food through which God declares,
'You are my son, my daughter.'

This is the time of change
delivered by God's Spirit
moving to life and health
those claiming little merit;
change which God's love demands
to prove that faith is living,
change which must overflow
in justice and forgiving.

Glory to God on high,
to Christ and to the Spirit.
Glory to God on earth,
whose image we inherit.
Glory to God alone,
our sacrament and story,
in whom we live and move
till lifted into glory.

STF 150

John L. Bell