

Lectionary Readings: Exodus 14: 5-31
Psalm 119: (41-48) 49-56
Matthew 6: 1-18

For the second week in a row we have only three readings – again from Exodus, Psalm 119 and Matthew’s Gospel.

When Moses and Aaron made their initial approach to Pharaoh with the request that the Israelite people should be allowed to leave Egypt; in order to travel into the wilderness to sacrifice and worship ‘properly’, we read that the king’s heart was hardened and conditions for the Israelite ‘work-force’ were made more difficult.

His heart was further hardened after every additional, by now, confrontation with the two Israelite leaders. Towards the end of the plagues he would confess his errors while suffering the effects of the plague in place at the time, and ask Moses to bring it to an end; then when that request was answered and the plague was over, his attitude changed and his heart hardened yet again. The Israelite people commenced their exodus on the night that the Lord brought the final plague on the Egyptians – the plague of the firstborn.

We read more detail of their departure and early journey at the end of chapter 13 and in the first four verses of chapter 14:

¹⁷When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, ‘If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.’

¹⁸So God led the people around by the desert road towards the Red Sea.^[a] The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle.

¹⁹Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the Israelites swear an oath. He had said, ‘God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place.’^[b]

²⁰After leaving Sukkoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert.

²¹By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.

²²Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

¹Then the LORD said to Moses, ²‘Tell the Israelites to turn back and camp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to camp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon.

³Pharaoh will think, ‘The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.’

⁴**And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them.** But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.’ So the Israelites did this.

Footnotes

a. [Exodus 13:18](#) Or the Sea of Reeds

b. [Exodus 13:19](#) See Gen. 50:25

Our reading today commences at the point the Egyptians realise that the Israelites have gone – it should not be surprising that once again we see a change of heart:

⁵When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, **‘What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!’**

⁶So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him.

I am intrigued by the way the Egyptians describe their relationship with the Israelites – *“We have lost their services!!”*

The on-line resource BibleGateway.com enables us to produce a comparison of Exodus 14: 5 in all translations”.

The list offers the verse in 54 alternative versions and of these, 39 refer to “service” or the Israelites “serving” the Egyptians.

One of these does, however, add *“we have lost our labour force”* which appears to be a halfway house to the 14 other translations which speak of “slaves” or “slavery” rather than “service”.

The “New Life Version” (NLV) is unique in its ‘translation’ - specifying neither slaves nor servants:

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had left, Pharaoh and his servants changed their minds about the people. They said, “What is this we have done? **We have let Israel go from working for us.**”

The Egyptians, having realised what they have suddenly lost, set out in hot pursuit using the army which included 600 chariots; catching up with the Israelites when they have made camp near the Red Sea.

The Israelites have accepted the Word of the Lord, brought to them by Moses and Aaron – they have happily followed the instructions for the night of Passover and willingly fled from Egypt. Now, as they see the pursuing army, they grumble and for the first of many times to come, turn on Moses as their leader:

¹⁰As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD.

¹¹They said to Moses, ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt?’

¹²Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!’

¹³Moses answered the people, ‘Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again.’

¹⁴ The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.'

¹⁵ Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on.

¹⁶ Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground.

¹⁷ I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them.

And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen.

¹⁸ The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen.'

The reply Moses gives to the people is to trust in the Lord for deliverance – *“The Egyptians you see today you will never see again”*; and *“The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still”*.

Moses may have said these words of encouragement to the Israelites but the next verse suggests that the Lord is not entirely satisfied with his leadership at that moment – *“Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on.”*

There then follow instructions for dividing the waters of the Red Sea to provide a 'dry' crossing point for the fleeing nation..

We read that the angel of the Lord and the pillar of cloud moved from its 'leading' position to one where it came between the Israelites and the Egyptians – providing light for the former and darkness for the latter.

In verse 21 we read of the strong east wind that drove the sea back – turning it into dry land. At this moment of time (30th August 2021) devastating winds and a strong storm surge are doing just the opposite in Louisiana – turning normally dry, inhabited land into a huge flooded area.

There is an infrequent situation in the UK where an area of intense low pressure passes just north of Scotland then turns into the North Sea. The storm surge created has on a number of occasions brought devastation by flood to the East Coast and prompted the building in the 1970's of the Thames Barrier to protect London from tidal flooding.

The pursuing Egyptians followed the Israelites onto the 'dry' land that had once been under water but it is clear from the text that it was not suitable ground for chariots. With the Egyptians trapped in this area the sea came back in – presumably the east wind 'dropped' - and the heavily armoured army were submerged – we read that *“Not one of them survived”*.

The last two verses of our reading:

³⁰ That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore.

³¹ **And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.**

The Israelites were a 'fickle' nation. Their trust in Moses, and through him their trust in the Lord, was not to last long. They had only travelled for **three days** from the Red Sea when they came to Marah, with its bitter waters:

The waters of Marah and Elim

²² Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they travelled in the desert without finding water.

²³ When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter.

(That is why the place is called Marah!)

²⁴ **So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, 'What are we to drink?'**

²⁵ **Then Moses cried out to the LORD**, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood.

He threw it into the water, and the water became fit to drink.

There the LORD issued a ruling and instruction for them and put them to the test.

²⁶ He said, 'If you listen carefully to the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you.'

²⁷ Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water.

Clearly the Israelites were prepared to accept and follow the Word of the Lord given through Moses and Aaron – at least they were prepared to accept and follow when the 'going was good', but were easily turned in the opposite direction (to follow their own ideas and opinions) when there was any adversity.

What about us? Are we constant in trusting the Lord, confident in His guidance for every part of our lives or are we, like the Israelites, subject to winds of change?

Psalm 119 again – this week stanzas 6 (וַ **Waw**) and 7 (וַ **Zayin**).

In its introduction to the psalm as a whole, the NIV Study Bible comments:

A devotion on the word of God. The author was an Israelite of exemplary piety (probably post-exilic) who (1) was passionately devoted to the word of God as the word of life; (2) humbly acknowledged, nevertheless, the errant ways of his heart and life; (3) knew the pain – but also the fruits – of God’s corrective discipline; and (4) had suffered much at the hands of those who arrogantly disregarded God’s word and made him the target of their hostility, ridicule and slander. It is possible that he was a priest – and the psalm might be a vehicle for priestly instruction in godliness.

This massive acrostic demands patient, meditative reading. In regards to length, form and type it stands alone in the Psalter, and of all the psalms, this one is most likely to have been composed originally in writing and intended to be read rather than sung or recited.

Matthew Henry in his Commentary, written in the early 1700’s, clearly sees David as the source of the psalm.

At the start of his introduction, he writes:

This is a psalm by itself, like none of the rest: it excels them all, and shines brightest in this constellation. It is much longer than any of them more than twice as long as any of them. It is not making long prayers that Christ censures, but making them for a pretence, which intimates that they are in themselves good and commendable. It seems to me to be a collection of David’s pious and devout ejaculations, the short and sudden breathing and elevation of his soul to God, which he wrote down as they occurred, and towards the latter end of his time, gathered out of his day-book where they lay scattered, added to them many like words, and digested them into this psalm, in which there is seldom any coherence between the verses, but like Solomon’s proverbs, it is a chest of gold rings, not a chain of gold links.

As last week, there is a ‘set’ part to the reading (stanza 7, verses 49-56) with “**Waw**” (stanza 6, verses 41-48) being an optional ‘extra’.

In commenting on verses 49-56, the NIV Bible Commentary says:

The psalmist knows that the Lord’s promises are sure; therefore he has “hope” and “comfort” even in suffering. The “arrogant mock” him, but he gets more provoked at their apostasy from God than at the suffering they cause him. They drive him to greater loyalty. The word of the Lord sustains and restores life. He can therefore sing the praises of God’s “decrees” (*huqqim*) day and night. **This lifestyle does not develop overnight but comes from habitual practice.**

Once again we can be challenged by a single verse (56) of this Scripture and the commentary on it.

Can we ‘in all honesty’ make the same claim of having this “habitual practice” for ourselves?

There would appear to be a consistent theme in verses 49-56 - in contrast the NIV Bible Commentator divides verses 41-48 into three sections:

- 41-42** This stanza continues the elements of prayer and commitment. The “righteousness” of God extends to deliverance and vindication from one’s adversaries. The dreaded “disgrace” will be removed, and the psalmist will rebuke the one who “taunts” him. Hope in salvation is grounded in God’s word of “promise”, and his promise calls for “trust”.
- 43-45** The psalmist pleads with the Lord to be true to his promises. The psalmist promises to remain loyal to the Lord throughout life. His devotion is a free expression of his love for God, and in this walk he experiences the Lord’s blessing and bounty.
- 46-48** The psalmist vows to speak about God’s “statutes” (*edoth*) unashamedly, even in the presence of “kings”. He is so full of love for God and so filled with joy in the prospect of salvation that he strongly asserts his “love” and “delight” as he prays and meditates.

The psalmist is clearly aware of the Lord’s presence with him, at all times – even in adversity. Given the pace and distractions of Twenty-first Century life, may it be our constant prayer that we too may sense the Lord with us at all times.

In the Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus is teaching about “giving to the needy, prayer and fasting”. The first two of these are familiar to us, the third – part of Jewish practice In His time – not very familiar within our Christian tradition. The word “ostentation” comes to mind – those who make an exhibition of their giving and their praying. Jesus is saying in both cases that it should be done individually and ‘secretly’. He, typically, exaggerates the instruction about giving:

³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret.
Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

The thought of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing is this exaggeration - seeing as both hands are controlled by the brain, but the instruction that giving should be private and personal (in secret) is given a real emphasis by this illustration.

The instruction on prayer is not exaggerated in the same way. Jesus condemns those who make a public display of this activity. That is not to say there should be no prayer in public worship, there is however a salutary warning to those who lead such ‘public prayer’ – is it pitched at the right level; is it speaking to the Lord or just a succession of eloquent words? Do you remember (or still experience) traditional prayer meetings. There did become a tendency to know who would pray publicly; the order in which people would pray; and even what each person would say!!

Jesus gives a sound instruction to the person praying privately:

⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

⁸ **Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.**

“*The Lord knows what you need before you ask him*” – how often do we spend time in prayer talking to God (‘babbling’) and never pausing to hear His reply, to learn what He wants from us?

Jesus then goes on to outline the ‘Family Prayer’. In Matthew, the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ is given in the context of Jesus teaching about giving, praying and fasting. This is in contrast to Luke’s account where it is given in response to a disciple who asks Jesus to teach them to pray – as John (the Baptist) taught his disciples.

Here in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus says:

New International Version

⁹ This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,^[a] but deliver us from the evil one.^[b]”

Footnotes

a. [Matthew 6:13](#) The Greek for *temptation* can also mean *testing*.

b. [Matthew 6:13](#) Or *from evil*; **some late manuscripts one, / for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen.**

Authorised (King James) Version

⁹ After this manner therefore pray ye:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

¹⁰ Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as *it is* in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever.

Amen.

We are so used to reciting this prayer in public that, at times through taking a breath, we neglect the punctuation – phrases that are connected:

“*And forgive us our debts (trespasses), as we forgive our debtors (those who trespass against us)*”

Jesus comments further on the ‘Pattern Prayer’ He has just given them:

¹⁴ **For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.**

¹⁵ **But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.**

As fasting is not a common activity within our tradition no further comment will be made – except perhaps to ask:

Does it have a place of value in our worship?
Should **we** adopt it as a practice?

‘Forgive our sins as we forgive’,
You taught us, Lord, to pray,
But You alone can grant us grace
To live the words we say.

How can Your pardon reach and bless
The unforgiving heart
That broods on wrongs, and will not let
Old bitterness depart?

v.1 - Matthew 6:12

In blazing light Your cross reveals
The truth we dimly knew,
How small the debts men owe to us,
How great our debt to You!

Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls,
And bid resentment cease;
Then, reconciled to God and man,
Our lives will spread your peace.

Rosamond E. Herklots

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Lord, Thy word abideth,
And our footsteps guideth;
Who its truth believeth
Light and Joy receiveth.

When our foes are near us,
Then Thy Word doth cheer us,
Word of consolation,
Message of salvation.

When the storms are o’er us
And dark clouds before us,
Then its light directeth,
And our way protecteth.

v.2 - Psalm 119:50

Who can tell the pleasure,
Who recount the treasure,
By Thy Word imparted
To the simple-hearted?

Word of mercy, giving
Succour to the living;
Word of life, supplying
Comfort to the dying!

O that we, discerning
Its most holy learning,
Lord, may love and fear Thee,
Evermore be near Thee.

Henry Williams Baker

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