

Lectionary Readings: Exodus 18: 13-26
Psalm 119: 73-80 (81-88)
Matthew 7: 1-14

The Israelites have crossed the ‘divided’ Red Sea (Exodus 14); they have celebrated their deliverance at the hand of the Lord and the subsequent annihilation of the Egyptian army (Exodus 15); they have commenced their ‘wanderings’ in the desert, the wilderness, - complaining about undrinkable water and/or lack of water/food. (Exodus 15, 16 and 17)

They have been attacked the Amalekites: (Exodus 17)

The Amalekites defeated

⁸ The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim.

⁹ Moses said to Joshua, ‘Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.’

¹⁰ So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill.

¹¹ As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning.

¹² When Moses’ hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up – one on one side, one on the other – so that his hands remained steady till sunset.

¹³ So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.

¹⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven.’

¹⁵ Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner.

¹⁶ He said, ‘Because hands were lifted up against^[a] the throne of the LORD,^[b] the LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.’

Footnotes

- a. [Exodus 17:16](#) Or to
- b. [Exodus 17:16](#) The meaning of the Hebrew for this clause is uncertain.

We then come to chapter 18 and our reading commencing at verse 13. Moses is sitting *“in his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning to evening”*.

The next verse comes as a bit of a surprise:

*“When his **father-in-law** saw all Moses was doing for the people, he said*”.

The last time we met ‘Jethro, the priest of Midian’ was in chapter 4 – Moses having experienced the ‘burning bush’ and answering God’s call went back to Jethro to ask his permission to return to Egypt, taking with him his wife and child.

What then was Jethro doing in the Israelite camp in the desert and how did he come to be there? The answer is found at the beginning of chapter 18:

¹ Now Jethro, the priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses, heard of everything God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, and how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt.

² After Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro received her ³ and her two sons. One son was named Gershom,^[a] for Moses said, ‘I have become a foreigner in a foreign land’; ⁴ and the other was named Eliezer,^[b] for he said, ‘My father’s God was my helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.’

⁵ Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, together with Moses’ sons and wife, came to him in the wilderness, where he was camped near the mountain of God.

⁶ Jethro had sent word to him, ‘I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons.’

⁷ So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. They greeted each other and then went into the tent.

⁸ Moses told his father-in-law about everything the LORD had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for Israel’s sake and about all the hardships they had met along the way and how the LORD had saved them.

⁹ Jethro was delighted to hear about all the good things the LORD had done for Israel in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians.

¹⁰ He said, ‘Praise be to the LORD, who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who rescued the people from the hand of the Egyptians.’

¹¹ Now I know that the LORD is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly.’

¹² Then Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and other sacrifices to God, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat a meal with Moses’ father-in-law in the presence of God.

Footnotes

- a. [Exodus 18:3](#) Gershom sounds like the Hebrew for a foreigner there.
- b. [Exodus 18:4](#) Eliezer means my God is helper.

It is interesting to note that at this time the Lord was only considered to be one of a number of Gods – albeit greater than all the rest.

The NIV Study Bible suggests that Moses sent Zipporah (and his sons) to her father with the news that the Lord had blessed his mission and that he was in the vicinity of Mount Sinai. This suggestion probably comes from the information in verse 1 that Jethro had “*heard of everything God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, and how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt*”?

Jethro sees a very practical problem – Moses is trying, by himself, to solve all the domestic problems and disputes of a nation:

¹⁴ When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, ‘What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand round you from morning till evening?’

¹⁵ Moses answered him, ‘Because the people come to me to seek God’s will.

¹⁶ Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God’s decrees and instructions.’

¹⁷ Moses’ father-in-law replied, ‘What you are doing is not good.

¹⁸ **You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out.**

The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone.

¹⁹ Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people’s representative before God and bring their disputes to him.

²⁰ Teach them his decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave.

²¹ But select capable men from all the people – men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain – and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.

²² Let them serve as judges for the people at all times, but let them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you.

²³ If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied.’

Moses listens, agrees, and chooses capable men to become leaders of the people – serving as “*judges for the people at all times.*” They dealt with the simple, straightforward problems, only referring the ‘difficult’ cases to Moses, the most senior of all the judges.

In time we find the Lord raising a man or a woman to be the people’s leader – leaders who became known as Judges up to the time the people demand of Samuel a king – king Saul.

The final verse of Exodus 18, omitted from our reading today:

²⁷ Then Moses sent his father-in-law on his way, and Jethro returned to his own country.

In Jethro’s opportune arrival and the sound advice he subsequently gives to his son-in-law we must see the guiding hand of the Lord.

Thy hand, O God, has guided
Thy flock, from age to age;
The wondrous tale is written,
Full clear on every page;

This week we turn to the 10th stanza (♪ *Yodh*) of Psalm 119 for our reading and the 11th stanza (♫ *Kaph*) as the ‘optional extra’.

The NIV Study Bible comments on the 10th stanza:

v.73 “*give me understanding*”. What I need to perfect the work you began when you formed me.

vv. 73-80 Complete your forming of me by helping me to conform to your righteous laws so that the arrogant may be put to shame and those who fear you may rejoice with me. The stanza has a concentric structure.

Verse 79 stands out:

⁷⁹ May those who fear you turn to me, those who understand your statutes.

By “*those who fear you*” the psalmist clearly means those who also believe in and follow the Lord – it would appear that the author was in a position of potential influence.

The NIV Bible Commentary has the following for this stanza:

vv. 73-74 The psalmist believes that God has “*made*” him for the purpose of having “*understanding*” to fulfil his “*commands*” (*miswoth*). Since he has initiated the relationship, the psalmist is confident that the righteous may soon rejoice.

vv. 75-80 The psalmist can say, “*I know*” that God’s “*laws*” (*mishpatim*) are “*righteous*” and faithful, because he has an experiential knowledge of God, of his “*unfailing love*”, and of his “*compassion*”.

God’s purpose for affliction is to refine the relationship with his children.

When he looks at humans, the psalmist sees the “*arrogant*”, who have wrongfully dealt with him and must get their just deserts.

While waiting he continues to “*delight*” in God’s “*law*” (*torah*), to meditate on the Lord’s

“*precepts*” (*piqqudim*), and to walk in a “*blameless*” way before God.

The psalmist also prays that they who “*fear*” the Lord may be encouraged and rejoice at God’s

vindication.

The Message paraphrases this stanza, using more common place language:

With your very own hands you formed me; now breathe your wisdom over me so I can understand you.
When they see me waiting, expecting your Word, those who fear you will take heart and be glad.
I can see now, GOD, that your decisions are right; your testing has taught me what's true and right.
Oh, love me—and right now!—hold me tight! just the way you promised.
Now comfort me so I can live, really live; your revelation is the tune I dance to.
Let the fast-talking tricksters be exposed as frauds; they tried to sell me a bill of goods, but I kept my mind fixed on your counsel.
Let those who fear you turn to me for evidence of your wise guidance.
And let me live whole and holy, soul and body,

Turning to stanza 11 we read a passage with a totally different atmosphere – it concentrates on the persecution that the psalmist is experiencing.

Again, The Message paraphrases and slightly amplifies what would be found in a conventional ‘translation’:

I'm homesick—longing for your salvation; I'm waiting for your word of hope.
My eyes grow heavy watching for some sign of your promise; how long must I wait for your comfort?
There's smoke in my eyes—they burn and water, but I keep a steady gaze on the instructions you post.
How long do I have to put up with all this? How long till you haul my tormentors into court?
The arrogant godless try to throw me off track, ignorant as they are of God and his ways.
Everything you command is a sure thing, but they harass me with lies. Help!
They've pushed and pushed—they never let up - but I haven't relaxed my grip on your counsel.
In your great love revive me so I can alertly obey your every word.

Turning again to the NIV Bible Commentary, we read:

In his despair the psalmist looks only to the Lord for his “*salvation*”, as promised in his “*word*”. He is being persecuted “*without cause*”, and his endurance is wearing down. His soul “*faints*”, his “*eyes fail*”, and he feels as if he is near the end of his strength. He feels himself to be “*like a wineskin in the smoke*”, i.e., useless, shrivelled, and unattractive because of being blackened with soot. In his loneliness he wonders when God will comfort him, and asks the Lord to execute “*justice*” (*mishpat*). In contrast to the “*arrogant*”, he loves God and his word. Thus he also submits himself to the Lord's “*help*” for preservation of life.

The NIV Study Bible comments on “*like a wineskin in the smoke*” in a similar way saying:

“as a wineskin hanging in the heat and smoke above a fire becomes smudged and shrivelled, so the psalmist bears the marks of his affliction”.

The Study Bible also points out that this is the last stanza in the first half of the psalm, and like the closing stanza, it is dominated by prayer for God's help. Such a prayer is also to be found in stanza 19 as we will see next week.

Our Gospel reading this week brings some ‘hard’ teaching from Jesus as well as a comforting promise.

As I read Matthew 7:12 -

¹² So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

my mind goes back to a character in a children's' book I read when very young. An 1863 Victorian novel (more a morality tale) by the Rev. Charles Kingsley - ‘The Water Babies’ features a ‘good’ lady named “Mrs Do-As-You-Would-Be-Done-By”. In this character we have what Jesus called the summation of the Law and the Prophets.

(Delving into the ‘archives’ some time ago to refresh my mind on Mrs D. – probably for a sermon illustration – I came across another character, one that I did not remember, Mrs D's sister, a person of opposite character - “Mrs Be-Done-By-As-You-Did”.)

Given our human nature and our failure, so often, to live up to our Christian calling I'm sure we can all see the difference between these two characters – one describing what we so often are, the other what we hope to become.

Our Old Testament reading took us back to a time when Moses established ‘judges’ to serve the Israelite people – in Matthew we read of Jesus saying “Do not judge”.

There is of course a vast difference between the ‘establishment judges’ chosen by Moses and the sort of ‘critical judgement, Jesus was talking about in this passage. Once again we see a wonderful example of His deliberate exaggeration given in this teaching, it is almost humorous – but very much to the point; “don't comment on a speck of dust in your brother's eye when you have a massive plank in your own”!

Going back to the first two verses of our reading, Jesus says:

Judging others

¹ Do not judge, or you too will be judged.

² For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

The ‘comforting promise’ comes in the middle section of the reading – in words that are very familiar to us:

⁷ Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

⁸ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

The Scriptural Index in *Singing the Faith* links the third verse of a hymn written by Frances Ridley Havergal with verse 8 of Matthew, chapter 6.

Master, speak! Though least and lowest,
let me not unheard depart;
Master, speak! For O thou knowest
all the yearning of my heart,
knowest all its truest need:
speak, and make me blest indeed.

Here we have the promise that if we ask we will receive; if we seek we will find; and if we knock the door will be opened to us. In Revelation, chapter 3 – a message to the church in Laodicea - we also read of a door, a door being knocked:

¹⁹ Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent.

²⁰ **Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.**

²¹ To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne.



Jesus stands at the “door” of our lives – waiting for it to be opened, to let Him in. Can you, at this moment, ‘see’ an image of that painting by William Holman Hunt (“The Light of the World” – 1851-53); a ‘copy’ of which found a place on so many walls in our church premises.

Jesus, standing with a lantern, knocking on a door that does not appear to be in regular use.

The final two verses of our reading speak of the two ways available to each of us; the wide gate and broad highway, where the going is easy; or the narrow gate leading to the hard going of the narrow road.

I wonder if we ever stop to consider which of these ways we are really following. Are we looking for the ‘easy’ way or are we prepared to face many difficulties as we go through life?

Jesus warns us that the life He has set before us will not be easy: (Matthew 10)

³⁴ Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

³⁵ For I have come to turn “a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law –

³⁶ a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.”^[a]

Footnotes

a. [Matthew 10:36](#) Micah 7:6

Help us, O Lord, to learn
the truths your word imparts,
to study that your laws may be
inscribed upon our hearts.

H&P 474, STF 501

Help us, O Lord, to live
the faith which we proclaim,
that all our thoughts and words and deeds
may glorify your name.

Help us, O Lord, to teach
the beauty of your ways,
that all who seek may find the Christ,
and make a life of praise.

William Watkins Reid