

Lectionary Readings: Exodus 19: 10-25
Psalm 119: 137-144 (145-152)
Matthew 8: 23-34

The ‘Exodus’ from Egypt continues; it is relatively early in Israel’s wanderings in the desert. At the beginning of Exodus chapter 19 we read:

At Mount Sinai

¹ On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt – on that very day – they came to the Desert of Sinai. ² After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

³ Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, ‘This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel:

⁴ “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.

⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you^a will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”
 These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.’

Footnotes

a. *Exodus 19:6* Or *possession, for the whole earth is mine.* ⁶ You

Our reading tells of three days of preparation for the nation meeting with God – albeit at a distance. Verses 12 and 13 warn the people of the consequences of encroaching onto, or even touching, Mount Sinai.

When Moses is called up to the top of the mountain to meet with God, the Lord is still concerned that the people may try to follow him onto the mountain:

²⁰ The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain.

So Moses went up ²¹ and the LORD said to him, ‘Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish.

²² Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them.’

²³ Moses said to the LORD, ‘The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, “Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.”’

²⁴ The LORD replied, ‘Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the LORD, or he will break out against them.’

²⁵ So Moses went down to the people and told them.

This assembly of the nation at Mount Sinai is of course to receive the “Ten Commandments” (*Exodus 20*) – a passage which we do not share as part of the Lectionary readings; next week we move on to Exodus chapter 24.

This week we come to the end, for the moment, of readings from Psalm 119 – the eighteenth and (nineteenth) of twenty-two stanzas. The set reading (verses 137-144) corresponds to the letter **Ⲯ Tsadhe** and the ‘optional’ reading (verses 145-152) to the letter **Ⲓ Qoph**.

The NIV Study Bible has one general comment on verses 137-144 – “*The Lord and his laws are righteous*”.

The NIV Bible Commentary has the following comment:

The conviction that the Lord is “righteous” and “trustworthy” evokes a response of “zeal”, which increases as the psalmist’s adversities increase. His adversaries “ignore” God’s laws, whereas he does not “forget” them. Instead, he “loves” them and finds his “delight” in them.

Yet he feels that his loyalty to the Lord and his devotion to godliness have been unrewarded. Instead, troubles have come his way. But he holds onto faith in the Lord, praying humbly that he may “understand” so as to be revived in his inner being.

This stanza has, on the whole, made positive statements about the Lord, his laws, and the psalmist’s relationship with his God. There is a contrast when we move into stanza nineteen. Various notes on the psalm as a whole tell us that the first three and the last three stanzas are by way of introduction and conclusion - which means that our optional reading (verses 145-152) is the final ‘mainstream’ stanza before the concluding three.

The NIV Bible Commentary divides this stanza into two sections:

145-149 Out of the conviction of God’s righteousness, the psalmist cries out for God’s help. He feverishly presents his lament before the Lord that he may “answer” him in delivering him from adversity. While waiting for God’s deliverance, he faithfully holds to God’s expectations. His longing for God is so intense that he prays “for help” throughout the night. At that time he also meditates on God’s promises (*imrah*). He waits for the Lord to come through, having put his “hope” in God’s word and in renewal of God’s “love”.

150-152 Though the wicked hunt the psalmist down, the Lord is nearby. Moreover, his relationship with the Lord has been well established. His “statutes” (*edoth*) are constant.

A more general comment in the NIV Study Bible says “‘*Save me, O Lord, and I will keep your law.*’ – As the psalm draws to a close, prayer for deliverance becomes more dominant.”

The reading from Matthew describes two well-known incidents during Jesus’ time in Galilee. Verse 28 may perhaps surprise us – **two** demon-possessed men in the region of the Gadarenes?

- ²⁸ When he arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes (*or Gergesenes / Gerasenes – depending on manuscript*), two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way.

It is likely that we are more familiar with an account from another Gospel !

Returning to the first part of our reading – Jesus calming the storm - we find parallel accounts in Mark and in Luke:

(Matthew 8)

- ²³ Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him.
²⁴ Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping.
²⁵ The disciples went and woke him, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!’
²⁶ He replied, ‘You of little faith, why are you so afraid?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.
²⁷ The men were amazed and asked, ‘What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!’

(Mark 4)

- ³⁵ That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, ‘Let us go over to the other side.’
³⁶ Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him.
³⁷ A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.
³⁸ Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, ‘Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?’
³⁹ He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, ‘Quiet! Be still!’ Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.
⁴⁰ He said to his disciples, ‘Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?’
⁴¹ They were terrified and asked each other, ‘Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!’

(Luke 8)

- ²² One day Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Let us go over to the other side of the lake.’ So they got into a boat and set out.
²³ As they sailed, he fell asleep. A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger.
²⁴ The disciples went and woke him, saying, ‘Master, Master, we’re going to drown!’ He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm.
²⁵ ‘Where is your faith?’ he asked his disciples. In fear and amazement they asked one another, ‘Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him.’

In all three Gospels Jesus has been involved with teaching crowds and would appear to be “getting away” for some peace and quiet; time alone with his disciples.

Matthew, Mark and John record another instance of the disciples in a boat in violent weather conditions (a frequent occurrence on the Sea of Galilee) – the time when Jesus comes to them “walking on the water”

Turning to the second part of our reading – the healing of the ‘demon-possessed’ man or men we find accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke – all of them following the ‘Calming of the Storm’:

(Matthew 8)

- ²⁸ When he arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way.
²⁹ ‘What do you want with us, Son of God?’ they shouted. ‘Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?’
³⁰ Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding.
³¹ The demons begged Jesus, ‘If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs.’
³² He said to them, ‘Go!’ So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water.
³³ Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men.
³⁴ Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region.

(Mark 5)

- ¹ They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes (*alternatives - Gadarenes or Gergesenes, as before*).
² When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him.
³ This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain.
⁴ For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him.
⁵ Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

- ⁶ When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him.
⁷ He shouted at the top of his voice, 'What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!' ⁸ For Jesus had said to him, 'Come out of this man, you impure spirit!'
⁹ Then Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?'
 'My name is Legion,' he replied, 'for we are many.' ¹⁰ And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.
¹¹ A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside.
¹² The demons begged Jesus, 'Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.'
¹³ He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs.
 The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.
¹⁴ Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened.
¹⁵ When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.
¹⁶ Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man – and told about the pigs as well.
¹⁷ Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

(Luke 8)

- ²⁶ They sailed to the region of the Gerasenes, (*Gadarenes, Gergetrenes*) which is across the lake from Galilee.
²⁷ When Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs.
²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, 'What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!'
²⁹ For Jesus had commanded the impure spirit to come out of the man. Many times it had seized him, and though he was chained hand and foot and kept under guard, he had broken his chains and had been driven by the demon into solitary places.
³⁰ Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?'
 'Legion,' he replied, because many demons had gone into him.
³¹ And they begged Jesus repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss.
³² A large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus to let them go into the pigs, and he gave them permission.
³³ When the demons came out of the man, they went into the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.
³⁴ When those tending the pigs saw what had happened, they ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, ³⁵ and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.
³⁶ Those who had seen it told the people how the demon-possessed man had been cured.
³⁷ Then all the people of the region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, because they were overcome with fear. So he got into the boat and left.

The similarities and differences between the three accounts are quite noticeable especially the contrast between that in Matthew and those in the other two Gospels.

Dramatic healings such as these are not every day events for us in 21st Century Britain. I wonder if we are ever tempted to believe or even to say that such things, if they ever occurred, belong very much in the past, in history?

If so, we are putting serious limitations on the ways in which the Lord can work – we are 'bending' Him to our way of thinking rather than letting Him have total control.

O changeless Christ, forever new,
 Who walked our earthly ways,
 Still draw our hearts as once You drew
 The hearts of other days.

As once You spoke by plain and hill
 Or taught by shore and sea,
 So be today our teacher still,
 O Christ of Galilee.

As wind and storm their Master heard
 And His command fulfilled,
 May troubled hearts receive Your word,
 The tempest-tossed be stilled.

Calm me, Lord, as You calmed the storm;
 Still me, Lord, keep me from harm.
 Let all the tumult within me cease;
 Enfold me, Lord, in Your peace.

And as of old to all who prayed
 Your healing hand was shown,
 So be Your touch upon us laid,
 Unseen but not unknown.

In broken bread, in wine outpoured,
 Your new and living way
 Proclaim to us, O risen Lord,
 O Christ of this our day.

O changeless Christ, till life is past
 Your blessing still be given;
 Then bring us home, to taste at last
 The timeless joys of heaven.

Timothy Dudley-Smith

Songs of Fellowship 1469

Calm me, Lord, as You calmed the storm;
 Still me, Lord, keep me from harm.
 Let all the tumult within me cease;
 Enfold me, Lord, enfold me in your peace.

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David Adam