

Lectionary Readings: Exodus 24: 1-18
Psalms 120 and 121
Matthew 9: 1-8

For the final reading in a sequence from the Book of Exodus, we turn to chapter 24. It would appear that the nation is still camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. This time, when Moses is summoned onto the mountain he is to be accompanied by Aaron, Aarons' two eldest sons – Nadab and Abihu – and seventy elders of Israel.

Once again there is the warning that even this group should not approach the Lord:

- ¹ You are to worship at a distance,
² but Moses alone is to approach the LORD; the others must not come near.
 And the people may not come up with him.

The select group must worship at a distance; only Moses can approach the Lord; the people are left behind in the camp.

Moses speaks with God and reports back to the people all that the Lord has said. We note and bear in mind their response:

- ³ When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice, '
Everything the LORD has said we will do.'
⁴ Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said.

The next part of our reading has Moses building an altar at the foot of the mountain and the offering of sacrifices to the Lord. The whole passage is headed, in the NIV, "**The covenant confirmed**" and in verses 7 and 8 we read:

- ⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people.
They responded, 'We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.'
⁸ Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, 'This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.'

Once again Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the seventy elders go up onto the mountain where an 'unusual' event occurs:

- ⁹ Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up
¹⁰ **and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky.**
¹¹ **But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.**

The next time Moses is summoned to the mountain to meet the Lord he is to stay for a considerable and significant period:

- ¹² The LORD said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction.'
¹³ Then Moses set out with Joshua his assistant, and Moses went up on the mountain of God.
¹⁴ He said to the elders, 'Wait here for us until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur are with you, and anyone involved in a dispute can go to them.'
¹⁵ When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, ¹⁶ and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud.
¹⁷ To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain.
¹⁸ Then Moses entered the cloud as he went up the mountain.
And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

As we read on in subsequent chapters we learn of the instructions that were given to Moses – detail of things to be created or instituted. These included *Offerings for the Tabernacle, The Ark, The Table, The Lampstand, The Tabernacle itself, The Altar of Burnt Offering, The Courtyard, Oil for the Lampstand, The Priestly Garments, The Ephod, The Breastpiece, Other Priestly Garments, Consecration of the Priests, The Altar of Incense, Atonement Money, Basin for Washing, Anointing Oil and Incense.*

The Lord then told Moses who was to work on these things and finally there were the rules for the Sabbath: (Exodus 31)

- ¹ Then the LORD said to Moses, ² 'See I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, ³ and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills – ⁴ to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, ⁵ to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts.
⁶ Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamak, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given ability to all the skilled workers to make everything I have commanded you: ⁷ the tent of meeting, the ark of the covenant law with the atonement cover on it, and all the other furnishings of the tent – ⁸ the table and its articles, the pure gold lampstand and all its accessories, the altar of incense, ⁹ the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, the basin with its stand – ¹⁰ and also the woven garments, both the sacred garments for Aaron the priest and the garments for his sons when they serve as priests, ¹¹ and the anointing oil and fragrant incense for the Holy Place.
 They are to make them just as I commanded you.'

The Sabbath

- ¹² Then the LORD said to Moses, ¹³ 'Say to the Israelites, "You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so that you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy."
- ¹⁴ "Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it is to be put to death; those who do any work on that day must be cut off from their people.
- ¹⁵ For six days work is to be done, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day is to be put to death.
- ¹⁶ The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant.
- ¹⁷ It will be a sign between me and the Israelites for ever, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed."
- ¹⁸ When the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant law, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.

When we see the quantity of instruction and information given to Moses by the Lord we realise it is not surprising that he was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights!

Remember the reaction of the Israelites when Moses told them the words of the law – before this final visit to the mountain; **"Everything the LORD has said we will do"** and **"Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, 'We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey'".**

Moses is on the mountain – the people are 'fickle' and forget what they have promised: (Exodus 32)

- ¹ When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered round Aaron and said, 'Come, make us gods^a who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.'
- ² Aaron answered them, 'Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.'
- ³ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron.
- ⁴ He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, 'These are your gods,^b Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'
- ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, 'Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD.'
- ⁶ So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterwards they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.
- ⁷ Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.
- ⁸ They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

Footnotes

- a. [Exodus 32:1](#) Or *a god*; also in verses 23 and 31
- b. [Exodus 32:4](#) Or *This is your god*; also in verse 8

The Lord commands Moses to return to the camp and he and Joshua make their way down the mountain:

- ¹⁷ When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, 'There is the sound of war in the camp.'
- ¹⁸ Moses replied:
- 'It is not the sound of victory,
it is not the sound of defeat;
it is the sound of singing that I hear.'
- ¹⁹ **When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain.**
- ²⁰ And he took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

We have to move on to chapter 34 to find instructions for the hewing of two new stone tablets which Moses takes up Mount Sinai to the Lord – to be inscribed again with 'The Testimony'.

In 34: 29 we read:

- ²⁹ When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD.
- ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him.
- ³¹ But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them.
- ³² Afterwards all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the LORD had given him on Mount Sinai.
- ³³ When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. ³⁴ But whenever he entered the LORD's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵ they saw that his face was radiant.
- Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the LORD.

We have an expression in English – “running with hare and hunting with the hounds”. The Israelite people are clearly under the influence of the Lord – through Moses; but when he appears to be ‘lost’ on the mountain they turn to their own devices and persuade Aaron to join in their very human plans (we see his pitiful defence of his actions in Exodus 32: 21-24 !!).

Does this passage speak to us in any way about our own lives – do we ever, like the Israelites, oscillate between following God’s promises and following our own agenda?

Moses is very close to the Lord and at the end of this ‘saga’ his very appearance reflects the glory of God. Let us pray that we may find ourselves similarly close to the Lord – not necessarily physically glowing but filled with and guided by the Holy Spirit.

In the Book of Psalms we find 15 of the 150 (numbers 120-134) that carry the superscription “*Song of the Ascents*” (the superscription to Psalm 121, one of our readings today, is slightly different – “*A song regarding ascents*”).

Every Jewish male was expected to go to the temple in Jerusalem three times a year – for the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Passover); the Festival of Weeks (Harvest, Shavuot, Day of First-fruits, Pentecost) and the Festival of Tabernacles (Sukkot – ‘booths’ or ‘tents’). Harvest celebrations began with the Festival of Weeks (first-fruits of the wheat harvest) and ended with the Festival of Tabernacles (first-fruits of the olive and grape harvest).

Jerusalem was situated at a higher elevation than the surrounding cities so pilgrims always ‘went up’ to Jerusalem. It is suggested that these fifteen psalms would have been sung, from memory, by pilgrims going up to a Festival.

There is also a thought that they may have been sung regularly by priests ascending the steps to the temple.

Introductory notes in the NIV Study Bible for psalm 120 state:

A prayer for deliverance from false accusers. Verse 7 suggests that the speaker is a king, in which case the accusers seek either to discredit him before his people or, more probably, to awaken suspicion about him in foreign courts. But if “war” is understood metaphorically, the psalm could be used also by a private individual beset by slanderers.

If we accept this interpretation of the psalm it seems strange to be one of those sung by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem!

The NIV Bible Commentary offers no introduction to the psalm but divides it into 4 parts:

1. *Assurance of Answered Prayer (v.1)*
2. *Prayer for Help (vv.2-4)*
3. *Expression of Desperation (v.5)*
4. *Longing for Peace (vv.6-7)*

Matthew Henry, in his Commentary, observes:

This psalm is supposed to have been penned by David upon occasion of Doeg’s accusing him and the priests to Saul, because it is like (*psalm*) 52, which was penned upon that occasion, and because the psalmist complains of his being driven out of the congregation of the Lord and his being forced among barbarous people.

1. He prays to God to deliver him from the mischief designed him by false and malicious tongues (vv.1-2).
2. He threatens the judgements of God against such (vv.3-4).
3. He complains of his wicked neighbours that were quarrelsome and vexatious (vv.5-7).

In singing this psalm we may comfort ourselves in reference to the scourge of the tongue, when at any time we fall unjustly under the lash of it, that better than we have smarted from it.

Psalm 121 appears to be a far more appropriate song for going up to the festival. The NIV Study Bible says of it:

A dialogue (perhaps liturgical) of confession and assurance. Its use as a pilgrimage song provides the key to its understanding. Whether the dialogue takes place in a single heart (cf. the refrain in psalms 42-43) or between individuals in the caravan is of no great consequence since all would share the same convictions. The comforting assurance expressed (see psalm 33) is equally appropriate for the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and for the pilgrimage of life to the “glory” into which the faithful will be received.

The psalm is composed of four couplets, each having an introductory line, which the rest of the couplet develops. Key terms are “the Lord” and “watch over”, each occurring five times.

The HIV Commentary gives as a title for the psalm – “**The Lord is my Guardian**”.

Matthew Henry sees this, once again, as a psalm probably penned by David:

Some call this the soldier’s psalm, and think it was penned in the camp when David was hazarding his life in the high places of the field, and thus trusted God to cover his head in the day of battle.

Others call it the traveller’s psalm (for there is nothing in it of military dangers) and think David penned it when he was going abroad, and designed it *pro vehiculo* – for the carriage, for a good man’s convoy and companion in a journey or voyage.

But we need not thus appropriate it; wherever we are, at home or abroad, we are exposed to danger more than we are aware of; and this psalm directs and encourages us to repose ourselves and our confidence in God, and by faith to put ourselves under his protection and commit ourselves to his care, which we must do, with an entire resignation and satisfaction, in singing this psalm.

1. David here assures himself of help from God (vv.1-2).
2. He assures others of it (vv.3-8).

In Matthew 9 we read verses 1-8, headed in the NIV – “**Jesus forgives and heals a paralysed man**”.

Verse 1 takes us back to the preceding chapter and our reading last week where Jesus has calmed the storm; landed in the region of the Gadarenes and healed two ‘demon-possessed’ men by sending the ‘demons’ into a herd of pigs which immediately rush into the lake and drown.

We don’t know the actual reason – maybe the loss of a valuable herd of pigs – but the local inhabitants “*plead with him (Jesus) to leave their region*”. So we find Jesus, once again, in a boat; crossing the lake and coming to Capernaum.

Verse 2 records “*Some men brought to him a paralysed man, lying on a mat*”. In Mark and Luke a paralysed man is lowered through a roof because Jesus is indoors, speaking to a crowded building. Is this the same incident?

To fully understand the significance of this event we should remember that in those times sickness or infirmity were considered to be the result of sin. This is illustrated by verses in John 9:

¹As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth.

²**His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’**

³‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’

We read that Jesus took action when He saw their faith. He speaks to the paralysed man but it is after seeing **their faith**. Mark tells us there were four men carrying their paralysed ‘friend’. Was it their faith alone or the combined faith of all five – had the paralysed man persuaded four of his friends to take him to Jesus?

When Jesus tells the paralysed man that his sins are forgiven the teachers of the law are outraged – this is blasphemy! Only God can forgive sin. Verse 4 speaks of Jesus reaction to their ‘mutterings’; the NIV Bible Commentary has, for this verse:

Jesus had seen the faith of the paralytic and his friends; now he saw the evil thoughts of some of the teachers of the law. Such discernment may have been supernatural, though not necessarily so. Jesus’ charge probed beyond their talk of blasphemy to what they were thinking in their hearts. And what they were thinking was untrue, unbelieving, and blind to what was being revealed before their eyes.

I have always been struck by the “logic” of the next thing Jesus says:

⁵**Which is easier: to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Get up and walk”?**

⁶But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.’
So he said to the paralysed man, ‘Get up, take your mat and go home.’

It wasn’t just a case of ‘easier to say’ but what lay behind it; if the man was paralysed because of his sin, the act of healing him must have removed the root cause – that causal sin. Jesus means that either of the statements in verse 5 results in “forgiveness of sin”.

The paralysed man is healed, gets up and goes home. The crowd are “*filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to man*”.

What, I wonder, was the mood of the teachers of the law? They had confronted Jesus and then been humiliated by Him; did any of them understand and appreciate the ‘logic’ spoken about in verse 5?

O God, by whose almighty plan
First order out of chaos stirred,
And life, progressive at your word,
Matured through nature up to man;
Grant us in light and love to grow,
Your sovereign truth to seek and know.

O Christ, whose touch unveiled the blind,
Whose presence warmed the lonely soul;
Your love made broken sinners whole,
Your power cast devils from the mind.
Grant us to bring your love, your care,
Your health, to sufferers everywhere.

O Holy Spirit, by whose grace
Our skills abide, our wisdom grows,
In every healing work disclose
New paths to probe, new thoughts to trace.
Grant us your wisest way to go
In all we think, or speak, or do.

H.C.A. Gaunt alt.