

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Exodus 16:2-15

NRSV

The people of Israel have travelled into the wilderness east of the Nile delta. Finding the water undrinkable, they have complained to Moses. God has made the water potable. He has tested their faith: will they accept him by trusting that he will feed and rule them? If they do, he will protect them from the plagues he inflicted on the Egyptians, rather than judging and destroying them.

Now the entire community complain (or grumble) “against Moses and Aaron”: about food. They would prefer to have died in Egypt where they ate plentiful seasoned “bread” (v. 3) rather than now dying of hunger. In complaining to their leaders, the people are, in fact, complaining against God (v. 8), who gives authority to the leaders. In these pre-Sinai (pre-Law) days, God simply grants their request, granting them “bread from heaven” (v. 4), “manna” (v. 31) “in the morning” (v. 7), but he again *tests* them (v. 4): will they obey him in only collecting food sufficient for one day at a time (except “on the sixth day”, v. 5, the day before the Sabbath)? In vv. 7-8, Moses and Aaron insist that the *beef* is not with them but with God. Moses, Aaron and the people see God’s presence, his “glory ... in the cloud” (v. 10). Further, he gives them “quails” (v. 13) “in the evening”.

V. 14 describes manna. It is a honey-like excretion from certain insects which infest tamarisk trees in this area. When it drops from the leaves it becomes almost solid, but in the heat of the day it melts, so it must be collected in the morning. That sufficient was available to feed all is a miracle, a special intervention by God. V. 15 tells us that the name *manna* comes from “‘What is it?’”, *man hu* in Hebrew: the Israelites ask *what do you call it?* Quail migrate from northern Europe to Africa and back. A shift in the wind during their long flight over water causes them to land exhausted in Sinai, where they are easily caught. In John 6:31, 49 John sees manna as a forerunner of Eucharist, given freely to sustain life. In Exodus, through food and water, the people are transformed, as they grow from adolescence to adulthood – into being God’s people, obedient to him.

Psalms 105:1-6,37-45

NRSV

As we have seen in past weeks, this psalm gives thanks to God for his saving acts in history. It urges all to “give thanks to the Lord”, to call on his name, to tell what he has done, to hold him in glory, to rejoice in him, and to continually seek him. Today’s historical portion takes us from the departure from Egypt laden with riches (“silver and gold”, v. 37) to receiving manna and quail (“food from heaven”, v. 40), to the Promised Land. Food and water were received because of God’s “promise” (v. 42), his covenant with Abraham. Finally, the psalm ties in obeying God’s laws with the gift of the Promised Land.

Philippians 1:21-30

NRSV

Paul writes from prison; in v. 12 he says that he wants the Christians at Philippi “to know ... that what has happened to ... [him] has actually helped to spread the gospel”. The good news has become known to his jailers; they now know that his “imprisonment is for Christ” (v. 13, and not for a crime) and thereby, in his absence, most of his fellow Christians have gained the confidence to “speak the word with greater boldness and without fear” (v. 14). Realizing that he may be facing death, he ponders what this may mean. The spread of the faith will need to go on without him, and he will not live to see the Day of the Lord, the coming of Christ at the end of time. And so he thinks of living and dying.

For him, Christ gives meaning to existence (“living is Christ”, v. 21), and physical death brings greater oneness with Christ (“gain”); living means preaching Christ, a “fruitful labour” (v. 22), while dying is being with him in glory. He would like to “depart”, (v. 23), to *move on*, but to continue his earthly life is needed more – for the benefit of those he has, and will, bring to Christ. And because of the greater need (v. 25), his life, he thinks, will continue in “progress and joy” with the church at Philippi, so that he may share with them when he next visits them (v. 26). He exhorts them as a community to live in an ethical way, consistent with “the gospel” (v. 27). They are to *stand firm*, as a soldier does at his post, sharing a common approach (“spirit”), working together to be of “one mind” in the faith – and not being scared off, “intimidated” (v. 28), by those who harass Christians. This one-mindedness is evidence that they are contributing to the downfall of their persecutors on the Day of Judgement, and the assurance of their own salvation – and God gives this. Then v. 29: God has given the Philippians the opportunity to suffer for Christ’s sake as well as believing in him: they share the same “struggle” (v. 30) or *contest* (as in a wrestling match) as Paul endures and expects.

Matthew 20:1-16

NRSV

The landowner appears to be unfair, but note that the passage begins “... the kingdom of heaven is like ...” and that the wages stand for God’s grace. God *chooses to give* (v. 14) the same to all: the landowner pays “whatever is right” (v. 4) – there is no hierarchy in heaven. God is generous to all who believe. Many who seem less deserving (in the story, those hired “about five o’clock”, v. 6, at the end of the day) will be treated generously too: this is God’s (free) choice. All true disciples are equal in God’s eyes, however and whenever they come to faith. What matters is God’s call to us, and our response. V. 16 is unexpected: those who were hired last are paid first (v. 8); those who have worked all day expect, but do not receive, a bonus. In Jesus’ day, opportunity and privilege were far from equal; he goes against contemporary thinking and action: we are all dependent on God’s mercy. A scholar has defined a parable as a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought. It is strange that the landowner miscalculates his need for help three times – but to emphasize this is to miss the point.

