

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Exodus 14:19-31

^{14:19} The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. ²⁰ It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night. ²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. ²² The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³ The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. ²⁴ At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. ²⁵ He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt." ²⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." ²⁷ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸ The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. ²⁹ But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ³⁰ Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹ Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

Commentary

After suffering from plagues sent by God, the Pharaoh has allowed the Israelites to leave Egypt. While the direct route to Canaan is along the coast of the Red Sea, God has led them towards the Sea of Reeds (13:17-18), out of concern that they may abort their mission if beset by enemies. Finding the Egyptian frontier forts too strong, they have turned back at God's behest. He has fooled the Egyptians into thinking that the Israelites were trapped, and then pursuing them. His plan will show Israel's God to be victor over Egypt and her gods.

The Pharaoh has had his chariots prepared for battle (14:6). The appearance of the Egyptian army has struck fear in the Israelites – they have complained (14:11, for the first of many times in the Exodus saga) about Moses' leadership (and God's): they prefer slavery to certain death. But Moses has calmed his people, by assuring them of rescue – with God fighting with them – if they do not panic. God has commanded Moses to divide the sea.

The “pillar of fire and cloud” (v. 24) may have their origins as markers carried at the head of an army or caravan, but from this event on they become symbols of God’s presence. The “angel of God” (v. 19) comes between the Israelites and the Egyptians protecting God’s people and confusing the Egyptians, as does the “pillar of cloud”.

The Sea of Reeds (“the sea”, v. 21) is shallow and surrounded with marshy land. God uses a natural phenomenon to achieve his purpose: *east winds* strong enough to blow away the water do occur. The battle turns when the Egyptian chariots bog down in the soft earth (v. 25). The story was handed down orally from one generation to the next; that “the waters” (vv. 22, 29) form a “wall” suggest that it grew in the telling. Vv. 30-31 are probably a later editorial comment: God saves; subjugation to the Egyptians is over; the Israelites have seen the marvel which God has done for them, so they hold him in awe and trust in him. We do not know precisely what happened at the Sea of Reeds, but we see the result: God sets his people on his way, led by Moses.

Reflection

A legend says that the angels in heaven rejoiced when they saw the Egyptians drowned in the Red Sea. God, hearing their rejoicing, rebuked them, saying, “How can you rejoice when my children the Egyptians have perished in the sea?” Sometimes, God’s purposes require human suffering – do you agree?

Romans 14:1-12

^{14:1} Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. ² Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³ Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. ⁵ Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶ Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. ⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." ¹² So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Commentary

Paul writes about two kinds of Christians: those who being “weak in faith” concern themselves with details and added practices (rather than the main objective); and the *strong* who concentrate on God’s purposes.

The “weak” are to be welcomed as full members of the community “for God has welcomed them” (v. 3). The particular practices (of piety) mentioned are not eating meat (“eat only vegetables”, v. 2), fasting regularly (vv. 5-6) and abstaining from “wine” (v. 21).

In Roman society, it was considered ill-mannered to “pass judgment” (v. 4) on the conduct of another master’s servant; he was answerable to his “own lord” or master. Similarly, each Christian is answerable to “the Lord” and should not be criticized. One’s own *conviction* (v. 5) before God is what matters. Living (and dying) for God is our objective (v. 8); we should not judge; God will judge our conduct at the end of time: “each of us will be accountable to God” (v. 12).

In 14:13-15:6, Paul writes to the *strong*, those who see the purpose of life clearly. They should refrain from causing others to lose their faith; and not let their ideas and practices, however good, be misconstrued as evil. Rather they are to “pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (v. 19). It is through living in a manner consistent with one’s conscience that one achieves a right relationship with God (v. 22). One’s actions must be founded in faith (v. 23).

Reflection

Paul reminds us that it is God’s prerogative to judge each of us at the end of time. Ask God and your companions in Christ to keep you accountable to that advice. Why is it so imperative that we not be judgmental in the Christian life?

Matthew 18:21-35

^{18:21} Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³ "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Commentary

The story-line of the parable is straight-forward. There are three episodes:

- A king decides to “settle accounts with his slaves” (v. 23, or possibly with court officials or even with finance ministers or tax gatherers); one of them owes “ten thousand talents” (v. 24), i.e. millions of dollars (to Jesus’ audience, as much as the fabled riches of Egyptian and Persian kings); he, of course, is unable to pay, so (as Mosaic law permitted) he and his family are to be sold. When he seeks forgiveness of the loan, the king grants it. (v. 27).

- But this slave then demands payment of a loan of three month's wages ("a hundred denarii", v. 28) from a fellow slave, and when forgiveness is sought, refuses to grant it (v. 30).
- When the king hears about this, he retracts his forgiveness and has the first slave tortured – probably for ever (v. 34).

In v. 35, Jesus identifies the figures in the parable: the king is God, the first slave any Christian, and the second slave any other person. Jesus makes a point in each of the episodes:

- God loves us so much that he will forgive any sin, however grievous;
- It is absurd to live in a way contrary to God's love and mercy; and
- Those who accept forgiveness from God but fail to forgive others likewise will be punished eternally.

Reflection

Forgiveness is central to living the Jesus way: "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," we pray in the Lord's Prayer. Why do you think God places such a high premium on forgiveness?

Responsive Psalter

from Psalm 114

^{114:1} When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,

² **Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion.**

³ The sea looked and fled; Jordan turned back.

⁴ **The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs.**

⁵ Why is it, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back?

⁶ **O mountains, that you skip like rams? O hills, like lambs?**

⁷ Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the LORD, at the presence of the God of Jacob,

⁸ **who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.