



TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST SUNDAY, AUGUST 23RD, 2020

The Gospel, the Christian Church and the ‘Powers’: The Need for a Redemptive World-View



The challenge of the intimate relationship between Donald Trump, Trumpian politics and the American Evangelical Churches

Today we find ourselves in a completely new context when it comes to the Hebrew Bible. The narrative about Joseph ended last week, and we now find ourselves entering the foundational story of Exodus. Here, we see a turn in world-view, a turn that arises from the changing social and economic position of the Hebrew people in Egypt: from a former respected minority to an oppressed one, forced to work as enslaved labour. Consistent with their upturned position in Egyptian society, the Hebrews begin to understand the exposed nature of life, the way in which the political powers determine everything: even life and death. The Hebrew Bible takes on board a view of the world which is sharply aware of the “powers”: those of nature to which human beings are subject and those embedded in society: political powers that at any time may turn upon them.

The Gospel reading from Matthew, concerns the confession of Peter about Jesus as the Christ. The original version of this narrative occurs in Mark’s Gospel – the first written gospel – but Matthew turns this story to other purposes, leading to a quite different point. Matthew’s interpretation of Peter’s confession is concerned about the state of the Christian church. In Matthew, the Church receives its authorization to become what it is: *the vehicle for life*. In short, the church is not to be as other powers that frequently promote death and suffering, but a counter-force. Matthew is worried that the Christian church always runs the risk of misunderstanding its vocation, lining up seamlessly with all the other powers – especially the political and the politicians – and in so doing, often unknowingly, obviously, betraying the kingdom. Both the Hebrew and Gospel readings speak to us about the need to understand the powers in our world, so that we may not conform to them.

GATHERING

We Prepare Ourselves: Bless the Lord my soul (Taizé)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4Svh-9ohg4&t=75s>

Welcome

In the name of God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

The Lord be with you

And also with you

Lighting the Paschal Candle

Hymn/Song: Love Divine (“Prom Praise”, Royal Albert Hall London, 2015) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igs3mNsppsI>

Opening Prayers

This prayer arises from the Gospel reading for today: Matthew 16:13-20. It concerns Peter’s confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah, as the Christ. This episode is also recorded in Mark’s Gospel, and in fact Matthew lifts it from Mark and edits it, to serve another purpose – see the notes on the Gospel below. Here, we use the episode, in the way that Mark originally intended: to raise the question of the identity and meaning of Jesus Christ. In Mark, while Peter makes his confession about Jesus’ identity, he fails to understand his own confession assuming that to follow Jesus is the guaranteed path to theological and political victory, rather than service of the kingdom and human beings, all of which incurs a cost, symbolized in the cross and crucifixion. He has a lot to learn about the real meaning of confessing the Christ, which raises as many questions as answers in the struggle for meaning.

In Caesarea
he asked; What do they say; who
is the Son of Man?

***Some say the Baptist,
Elijah, Jeremiah;
one of the prophets.***

You, who follow me,
who do you say that I am?
Tell me what you think.

***You must be the Christ,
Simon answered him; the Son
of the living God.***

Who are you? We ask
still; leaning out for meaning,
reaching out for hope.

***Who am I? We ask,
discovering our true selves
as we meet with him.***

Keep it to yourselves
for now, this revelation.
It will cause trouble.

Peace: We share the peace with each other from our homes.

LET'S HEAR THE WORD

Some Thoughts about the Christian Church, Faith and the "Powers"

Paul spoke frequently of the "Principalities and the Powers", that constitute the framework of our lives as human beings and societies. In the light of the development of science, these ideas were seen as displaced, old world, metaphysical superstition. The change came after World War I, when the word 'power' took on new meaning. From then, it became real, alluding to not something invisible and metaphysical, but to the concrete reality of nations and their striking forces. Today, the word 'Powers', read through the lens of the Bible, may refer to the impersonal rulers of society: economies, propaganda, public opinion, religious sentiments, racial prejudice and so on: those things that influence and sometimes dominate our lives, without being fully visible or transparent to us.

Albert van de Huevel, "These Rebellious Powers"

Naming the Powers, identifies our experiences of these pervasive forces that dominate our lives. Unmasking the Powers, takes away their invisibility, and their capacity to coerce us unconsciously into doing their bidding. Engaging the Powers involves joining in God's endeavour to bend them back to their divine purposes.

Walter Wink, "The Powers that Be"

"We must fight their falsehood with our truth, but we must also fight the falsehood *in our truth*."

H. Richard Niebuhr

"Speaking truth to power typically leads to poverty and punishment"

Stewart Stafford

Exodus 1:8-2:10 – tackling the dynamics of oppression

This is a long reading, but one that neither can nor should be edited, for the story itself is one of the most foundational of the Hebrew experience: the birth of Moses and the beginning of what was to become the Exodus. Today's reading is the first of nine consecutive passages from Exodus, and contains three related stories of Israel's time in captivity in Egypt. Some commentators claim that Exodus is chronologically, the first book of the Bible, in that it gives the story of Israel being constituted and chosen as God's people. Through their experience of oppression and slavery and their deliverance through the Exodus event, their character as a unified people is forged. It is only then with this new awareness of their own identity as a chosen and liberated people that they were able to look back and reflect that the God known in the Exodus had been the same God who created all that is: the insight expressed through the creation stories of Genesis.

For our purposes this morning, what we need to retain from the reading is that Moses is the central figure of the book of Exodus, and the central agent through whom God shapes his people's history. The reading for today sets the scene for the story of his own extraordinary infancy and preservation. It seems the one who has been preserved, will in turn help in the preservation and liberation of God's people. In the first portion, vs 8-14, we hear that things have changed in Egypt, that the new pharaoh who is not named – possibly it reflects the period of Seti I, or Ramses II. Under this unnamed pharaoh, the Hebrews become seen as a threat, and so are repressed through forced labour. In turn they multiply and the perceived threat becomes greater than ever. In the second portion, vss 15-21, we hear how significant and courageous Egyptian midwives – Shiphrah and Puah – who fear God more than pharaoh, refuse to cooperate in the program of infanticide – the murder of Hebrew male babies. When they are called to account, they give a rather cheeky answer, saying that the Hebrew women are more vigorous in giving birth than the Egyptian women, and have already delivered their child by the time the midwives arrive to attend them. There is a case here of how deception and trickery, which have been rampant in the Jacob

story, may now be employed for the benefit of God's people. The third portion, from v.22 to the end of the reading, concerns the birth of Moses. Against the bleak backdrop of mass murder, Moses is saved, ironically but significantly through the agency of Pharaoh's very own daughter. The humour in the story is inescapable, as Moses' sister is the one who suggests Moses' mother as the appropriate person to fill the role of wet-nurse. Moses is named apparently in the light of the Hebrew verb, *mashah*, 'to draw out', because he was drawn out of the water. Again, in a delicious irony, the name Moses may be a thoroughgoing Egyptian one, related to the last part of Pharaoh Ramses' name.

⁸ Then, a new king, who knew nothing about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. ⁹ He said to his people, "These Israelites are so numerous and strong that they are a threat to us. ¹⁰ In case of war they might join our enemies in order to fight against us, and might escape from^[a] the country. We must find some way to keep them from becoming even more numerous." ¹¹ So the Egyptians put slave drivers over them to crush their spirits with hard labour. The Israelites built the cities of Pithom and Rameses to serve as supply centres for the king. ¹² But the more the Egyptians oppressed the Israelites, the more they increased in number and the farther they spread through the land. The Egyptians came to fear the Israelites ¹³⁻¹⁴ and made their lives miserable by forcing them into cruel slavery. They made them work on their building projects and in their fields, and they had no pity on them.

¹⁵ Then the king of Egypt spoke to Shiphrah and Puah, the two midwives who helped the Hebrew women. ¹⁶ "When you help the Hebrew women give birth," he said to them, "kill the baby if it is a boy; but if it is a girl, let it live." ¹⁷ But the midwives were God-fearing and so did not obey the king; instead, they let the boys live. ¹⁸ So the king sent for the midwives and asked them, "Why are you doing this? Why are you letting the boys live?"

¹⁹ They answered, "The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they give birth easily, and their babies are born before either of us gets there." ²⁰⁻²¹ Because the midwives were God-fearing, God was good to them and gave them families of their own. And the Israelites continued to increase and become strong. ²² Finally the king issued a command to all his people: "Take every newborn Hebrew boy and throw him into the Nile, but let all the girls live."

2 During this time a man from the tribe of Levi married a woman of his own tribe, ² and she bore him a son. When she saw what a fine baby

he was, she hid him for three months. ³ But when she could not hide him any longer, she took a basket made of reeds and covered it with tar to make it watertight. She put the baby in it and then placed it in the tall grass at the edge of the river. ⁴ The baby's sister stood some distance away to see what would happen to him.

⁵ The king's daughter came down to the river to bathe, while her servants walked along the bank. Suddenly she noticed the basket in the tall grass and sent a slave woman to get it. ⁶ The princess opened it and saw a baby boy. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said.

⁷ Then his sister asked her, "Shall I go and call a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby for you?"

⁸ "Please do," she answered. So, the girl went and brought the baby's own mother. ⁹ The princess told the woman, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So, she took the baby and nursed him. ¹⁰ Later, when the child was old enough, she took him to the king's daughter, who adopted him as her own son. She said to herself, "I pulled him out of the water, and so I name him Moses."

The word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

Psalm 124 – A song, reflecting the Exodus spirit of Yahweh

Psalm 124 is another in the collection known as the 'Songs of Ascents' (Psalms 120-134). It is not certain why the title stands over each of these psalms. It could indicate either pilgrimage or liturgical connections. The group falls into three sub-groups: Psalms 120-124; 125-129; and 130-134. Today's psalm, therefore, brings the first sub-group to a close. There is constant stress within the group on reliance upon Yahweh and on Zion or Jerusalem as the place of blessing. Psalm 124 is a psalm of thanksgiving for Yahweh's presence with his people and deliverance of them in times of danger. By itself it could imply a military context but the coupling of the psalm with the reading from Exodus affords it a new context which celebrates the emergence of God's people from a situation where they were threatened by powerful individuals or governments that did not cater well for minorities or those who stand outside the 'norm' in one way or another. The psalmist's proclamation is that it is only through Yahweh that they have been delivered. This is expressed both through mythic allusion (the flood or raging waters) and by metaphor from the world of fowling (prey, snare and escape).

What if the LORD had not been on our side?

Answer, O Israel!

² ***“If the LORD had not been on our side
when our enemies attacked us,***

³ then they would have swallowed us alive
in their furious anger against us;

⁴ ***then the flood would have carried us away,
the water would have covered us,***

⁵ the raging torrent would have drowned us.”

⁶ ***Let us thank the LORD,
who has not let our enemies destroy us.***

⁷ We have escaped like a bird from a hunter's trap;
the trap is broken, and we are free!

⁸ ***Our help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.***

Romans 12:1-8 – living our lives through Jesus Christ

Here, Paul moves from his earlier concern with defending himself against those who disagree with his views about the old Israel in the scheme of salvation, to the very practical question of the Roman congregations and how they are to live together. They include diversity of approaches to matters like food in the Gentile world, which itself was highly theological, ethical and political. In doing so he begins from a good starting point: the heart of God, God's compassion and mercy.

Paul is always thinking about what shapes people's lives. It is another way of speaking of one's god. In his day - and certainly in ours - there are many people who count themselves as Christian, but are shaped by the prevailing values of those around them in a way that undoes anything that Christ might have wanted in their lives. They reflect particular national, political or social values, sometimes not even knowing they stand under such influence. They can even call some of these values "Christian". But there is no engagement with what is at the heart of Christ's message. He urges the Romans to engage in a process whereby they are shaped not by the prevailing fashions of the age but by Christ. It is in that sense a counter cultural renewal to which he calls the Romans. The renewing of one's mind - stance, attitudes, orientation - is the basis not only for individual wholeness but also for a healthy community or congregation. Paul's thinking and writing, is relationship based, not rule based. He sees this approach as the basis for developing discernment about God's will. The focus is on goodness, on pleasing God (the God of grace) and on maturity. Translating *teleios* here as 'mature' (one of its common meanings), rather than 'perfect' makes much better sense in the context. Paul will appeal to such maturity in what follows.

12 So then, my friends, because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer. ² Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God—what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect.

³ And because of God's gracious gift to me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you should. Instead, be modest in your thinking, and judge yourself according to the amount of faith that God has given you. ⁴ We have many parts in the one body, and all these parts have different functions. ⁵ In the same way, though we are many, we are one body in union with Christ, and we are all joined to each other as different parts of one body. ⁶ So we are to use our different gifts in accordance with the grace that God has given us. If our gift is to speak God's message, we should do it according to the faith that we have; ⁷ if it is to serve, we should serve; if it is to teach, we should teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage others, we should do so. Whoever shares with others should do it generously; whoever has authority should work hard; whoever shows kindness to others should do it cheerfully.

Matthew 16:13-20 - Peter's declaration about Jesus and the church as life-giving, facing up to the powers.

As indicated earlier in the front page of the liturgy, Matthew's 'take' on Peter's confession about Jesus' identity as the Christ, is similar but different. The reading itself then moves from Peter's confession, to his place as head of the Christian church, and by extension, the divine authority of the church. The issue then moves from Peter to the church's understanding of itself, of its mission in the world. Peter is being commissioned, the church is being commissioned to walk on water, to take the authority to exercise God's mission in the face of the powers of destruction and death in our world. 14:22-33 and 16:13-20 are closely linked (also by the confession as Son of God).

The focus on the church's role is continued in the word about the keys of the kingdom (16:19). There were traditionally in the hands of interpreters of the tradition. 23:13 accosts the scribes and Pharisees for using them to shut people out of the kingdom. Now there is to be a new body of scribes, who are to be inclusive. Binding and loosing reflects technical language, and refers both to binding and releasing interpretations of law (scripture) and their consequences. We see how it might apply in particular cases in 18:15-18, where the local

congregation is invested with the authority to deal with cases of discipline in the community.

¹³ Jesus went to the territory near the town of Caesarea Philippi, where he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

¹⁴ “Some say John the Baptist,” they answered. “Others say Elijah, while others say Jeremiah or some other prophet.”

¹⁵ “What about you?” he asked them. “Who do you say I am?”

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷ “Good for you, Simon son of John!” answered Jesus. “For this truth did not come to you from any human being, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And so I tell you, Peter: you are a rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church, and not even death will ever be able to overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven; what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.”

²⁰ Then Jesus ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

The Gospel of the Lord

Praise to you Lord Christ

(All the readings today have come from the Good News Translation)

Hymn for Meditation: Be Thou my Vision (Irish Traditional, Nathan Pacheco) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihJAJA4ibEs>

Some thoughts....

Let's Give: Our Offerings

Doxology

***Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,
praise him, all creatures here below,
praise him above, ye heavenly host,
praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.***

Prayer of Dedication

Prayers of the People

At the end of each prayer/petition the one who prays offers the words; “Jesus, you ask us to live for life”, and the response is “help us to challenge the powers of death”.

This week the Ecumenical Prayer Cycle continues to invite us to pray for the peoples of West Africa – Cape Verde, Senegal, the Gambia, Guinea and Guinea-Bissau. Below is a prayer for peace from the Christians of Senegal, praying for the past, the present and the future.

Lord, hear my prayer of peace and forgiveness!

*Lord God, forgive the white slave-traders of Europe and over the seas!
They hunted our children like wild elephants. They caught them, tied them up, whipped them and soiled their hands with their blood.*

Bless my people, Lord, those who seek their own faces under the threat of being recognized. May they continue to seek you in spite of the cold and famine that eats at their very bones, at their very insides. The woman who laments her absent husband, the fiancée her lost love, the mother her dead son, bless those who have lost loved ones, may we all unite under your love.

With your help, may all the people of Europe, Asia, Africa, and all who have sweated blood and suffering look beyond and see the haloed heads. Amen

Lord's Prayer

We prayerfully listen to the Folk Choir of Notre Dame University, Indiana, singing the Lord's Prayer (Padre Nuestro)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLIOVtC53xg>

Closing Hymn: How Can I Keep from Singing (Robert Wadsworth Lowry, sung by Audrey Assad)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Li2hddmy63U>

Blessing and Sending Out

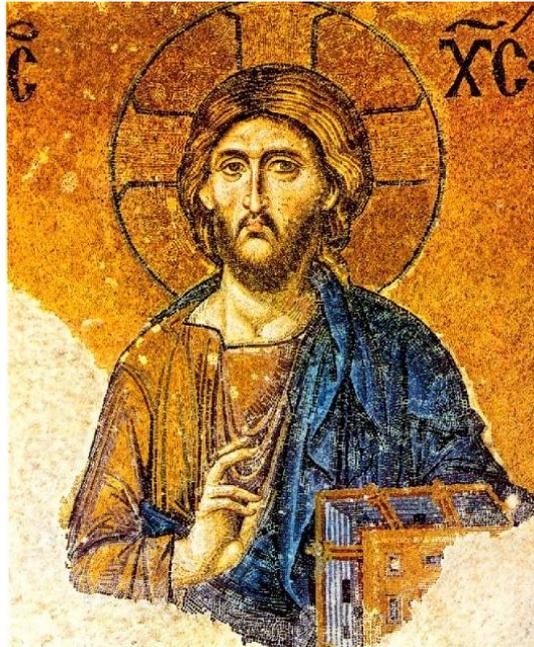
The blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
Be upon you and remain with you always

Our service has ended.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord

In the name of Christ

“In resurrectione tua” (Global Virtual Choir, Taizé)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-hybuhxJg8>



Christ the Ruler of the Universe, Pantocrator