



FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 6TH, 2020

WALKING ON EGGSHELLS FORGIVENESS AND FREEDOM



Nelson Mandela, a presence for liberation, freedom and forgiveness

Today we continue in the readings from Exodus, Romans and Matthew, while also sustaining our readings from the psalms, with Psalm 149, part of a body of songs from 145 through to 150, that form a sort of a grand doxology, all beginning and ending with the words “Halleluia, Praise the Lord”.

In all, these readings can be taken to be focused upon the themes of our service this morning: Liberation, Freedom and Forgiveness. The Exodus reading, concerns the continuation of the story of liberation of the Hebrew slaves, crushed as they were under the ‘sandal’ of pharaoh. It raises an interesting question of the relationship between ritual and actual reality. In the reading we hear a discussion about Passover as the historical ritual that pertains to and reflects the memory of the Exodus event. In the Hebrew Bible, this relationship between Passover and liberation is key and is programmatic, for the prophets as well as for Jesus. In fact, when the Hebrews begin to use religious ritual as a cover-up for injustice, where the values of liberation are liturgically confessed, but in reality, ignored – see Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah in particular – this is the final straw for Yahweh.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we discover a passage about discipline within the Christian congregation. Upon a cursory reading, it seems that the advice is fairly strong: namely for the community leadership to exercise its authority over those who deviate from the norms. However, a more careful reading – see the brief commentary to the reading below) – tells us that Matthew has a more creative manner of understanding forgiveness and inclusion. In the first instance, he is aware that forgiveness may be no more than a majority imposing its will upon some who are classed as deviant outsiders. To offer forgiveness then, demands that the forgiving community is capable of critically assessing its own motivations and drives, so it is not just imposing a model of bland and brutal conformity ‘in the name of God’. This is the behaviour of the cult. Second, there is here an insight that when the outsider has genuinely offended, that the act of forgiveness should be conscious and clear, that the offender, must be aware of the gravity of the offence in order to understand that he or she is really forgiven and liberated. Karl Rahner, the German theologian of the late 20th century, put it this way, “Only the one who is forgiven understands he is a sinner”. In other words, the act of forgiveness when really offered and really received as such, is an act of liberation for all.

GATHERING

We Prepare Ourselves: We adore You O Lord (Adoramus te Domine, Taizé) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SAMT6XHab9I>

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: Jesus the Name High over All (Charles Wesley)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZSeAYKG-8Ko&t=6s>

Opening Prayers

This prayer arises from the Gospel reading for today, Matthew 18:15-20. It is a piece written in Japanese Haiku form, by Ken Rookes (see his poems on Jeff Shrowder's website, "Billabong"). It is a prayer/poem which reflects the difficulty of forgiveness as a practice for communities. To forgive may be to encourage 'bad behaviour', but not to, runs the risk of imposing an 'iron cage' of conformity, which is surely inconsistent with the Christian call to liberty.

Words on Jesus' lips:
how the church should respond to
sinful behaviour.

We all make mistakes
do the wrong thing, hurt others;
needing forgiveness.

Even in the church
we fall short. How to react,
that is the challenge.

Save embarrassment
with a quiet word, hoping
to be reconciled.

Everybody
doesn't want to sort things out.
Do the best you can.

If you get nowhere
don't sweat on it. Let them go,
but don't stop hoping.

He is surely here
in the grace and forgiveness,
as the gathering.

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

This week the Ecumenical Prayer Cycle continues to invites us to pray for the peoples of West Africa – Ghana and Nigeria. Below is a prayer for unity, written from the very soul of western African nations that have known only its opposite over centuries. We would do well to offer this prayer for ourselves as well, in the developed world, which is struggling with the reality of division and the competing 'narratives' for people's loyalty, based in 'tribal' identities.

We invoke you, Spirit of Unity,
Transform our divisions and reshape our vision.
All of creation, all living beings, cry in the midst of injustice and
brokenness.
Spirit of Unity, reconcile your people.
We invoke you, Spirit of Unity,
Heal the wounds of our history,
Remove from us all that sustains our present divisions.
Unstop our ears to hear your call for unity.

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LET'S HEAR THE WORD

Some Thoughts about Liberation, Freedom and Forgiveness

Let us consider first, the need for a tough mind, characterized by incisive thinking, realistic appraisal and decisive judgement. The tough mind is sharp and penetrating, breaking through the crust of legends and myths, and sifting true from false. The tough-minded individual is astute and discerning. But we must not stop with the cultivation of a tough mind. The gospel also demands a tender heart. Tough mindedness without tenderheartedness is cold and detached, sometimes imposing behaviours which wreak of the authoritarian desire for conformity. On the other hand, tenderheartedness without the tough mind, may be caught in forms of libertarianism where everything is brushed under the carpet.

**Martin Luther King Jr, "A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart",
*Strength to Love***

"In another conversation I said, 'Tell me the truth. When you were leaving prison after twenty-seven years and walking down that road to freedom, didn't you hate them all over again?' And he said, 'Absolutely I did, because they'd imprisoned me for so long. I was abused. I didn't get to see my children grow up. I lost my marriage and the best years of my life. I was angry. And I was afraid, because I had not been free in so long. But as I got closer to the car that would take me away, I realized that when I went through that gate, if I still hated them, they would still have me. I wanted to be free. And so I let it go.'

Nelson Mandela," *Long Walk To Freedom*

Amnesty offered in many places around the world to military and police forces involved in blanket abuse of human rights, has often been understood as an act of forgiveness by the state. This is a complete misunderstanding of what forgiveness means. In fact, blanket amnesty constituted a missed opportunity for reconciliation, that begins with the conscious offer of forgiveness and the need for genuine penance on the part of the victimisers, which affords partial restoration of the victims. Amnesty offered by governments to their own militaries only trivializes and banalizes the path back to wholeness.

Jon Sobrino, “Theological and Ethical Reflections on the Truth Commission of El Salvador after the Atrocities of the Civil War 1979-1989”, *Impunidad, Una Perspectiva Etica*

Exodus 12:1-14: The Passover as the meal for freedom

The story moves on quickly from last week’s reading where Moses was challenged by Yahweh to lead his people out from oppression. After Moses’ numerous objections to his calling, he finally returns to Egypt with his brother Aaron (Exod 4:18-31). Predictably, Pharaoh rejects the delegation’s request for leniency for the Israelites, and their lot only gets worse (Exodus 5). After further revelations by Yahweh to Moses and Aaron (ch. 6) the real struggle is engaged. While it is expressed in terms of Moses’ contest with the Egyptian priests and the subsequent plagues on the land (chs. 7-11), the real contest is between Yahweh and Pharaoh: to see who has power, and whether those powers that offer life and release (3:7-12; 6:1-8) will overcome those that captivate and oppress (5:4-21).

What may be missed in a cursory reading for the text, is the correlation between ritual and reality. We moderns have little time for ritual. We are marked by spirit of individualism and are focused upon the speed of life, keeping up as if on a moving escalator. For most societies, this is not the case, and ritual performs a role that reinforces both individual and collective identities. In this reading, there is an ongoing connection between the ritual for freedom and liberation – Passover – and the reality of liberation itself.

The story of the Passover night starts in Exodus 11 with Yahweh declaring he will pass through the land and the first born of every house (both human and animal) will die. Only the Israelites will be spared. This will be the last of a series of plagues upon the Egyptians. The description of Passover in Exodus 12 probably comes from a later period when the festival was well established – another description is in Deut 16:1-8. The description in Exodus 12 seems to have arisen from a mixture of at least three rituals: the lamb with the blood, the *massot* (unleavened bread), and the offering of the firstborn. As strange as the reading may appear to our ears, three aspects of the Passover ritual for liberation are noteworthy: first, that the account of Passover is focused on the family situation, God’s liberation penetrates to the heart of Jewish society. Second, that Passover is to be celebrated constantly as the memorial for liberation. In re-enacting it, Jews commit themselves to living it out into the future. Third, that the Passover meal should be eaten, “dressed for the occasion”, ready to flee to freedom. In short, it is real, it is fundamental to what it means to become a people of God.

12 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, ² “This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. ³ Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb^[a] for his family, one for each household. ⁴ If any

household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbour, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. ⁵ The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. ⁶ Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. ⁷ Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. ⁸ That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. ⁹ Do not eat the meat raw or boiled in water, but roast it over a fire—with the head, legs and internal organs. ¹⁰ Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. ¹¹ This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's Passover.

¹² “On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. ¹³ The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

¹⁴ “This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD—a lasting ordinance.

The word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

Psalm 149: Dreaming the ‘End Times’ – a time for the people

Psalms 146-150 form a grand doxology at the conclusion of the collection of biblical psalms. In many ways Psalm 145 concludes the book of Psalms and Psalms 146-150 are a development on Ps 145:21 in the form of a great doxology. Psalm 146 introduces that doxology. The collection of five psalms may have originally had some liturgical context, but that has been lost in its present position. Psalms 146-150 describe ‘all flesh’ praising the Lord. There seems to be movement in the subject matter through these five psalms. Each of them adds to the voices which praise the Lord – first the psalmist (Psalm 146), then Jerusalem (Psalm 147), then all in heaven and earth (Psalm 148), then the faithful in Zion and Israel (Psalm 149), and finally ‘everything that breathes’ (Psalm 150). Various

dimensions of praise are evident in this movement – personal, community, political, and liturgical. Psalm 149 should be seen in the context of this growing doxology.

More specifically, Psalm 149 focuses on ‘the faithful’ (Heb. *hasidim*) who praise Yahweh. One might expect the subject to be all creation or ‘all flesh’ following Psalm 148 and anticipating Psalm 150. However, Psalm 149 takes us back to Yahweh’s own people. Moreover, they are not a people who have acted in their own strength or power. Verse 3 describes them as the *‘anawim* (NRSV: ‘the humble’; elsewhere ‘the poor’). The same term has been used in the past to refer to those who are dependent upon Yahweh’s compassion (Pss 9:19; 10:17; 22:27; 25:9; 34:3; 69:33; 147:6). Yahweh’s people play a special role in the establishment and proclamation of Yahweh’s kingship. His people are not lost in the flood of kings, princes, young and old who join in Yahweh’s praise (Ps 148:11-12). Just as Zion is a cornerstone in that burgeoning praise (Psalm 147), so are Yahweh’s faithful.

There is however cause for disturbance in this psalm. There is a sort of democratization that takes place: the people replace the king and do what the king historically does: defend Israel against the enemy. There is a sense of violence in this psalm which needs to be read carefully. Firstly, it is a psalm about the end times, a vision of what will be as the forces against life are defeated. Second, this needs to be read within the context of God’s peaceful purposes, evident in other parts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

¹ Praise the LORD.

***Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise in the assembly of his faithful people.***

² Let Israel rejoice in their Maker;

let the people of Zion be glad in their King.

³ Let them praise his name with dancing

and make music to him with timbrel and harp.

⁴ For the LORD takes delight in his people;

he crowns the humble with victory.

⁵ Let his faithful people rejoice in this honour

and sing for joy on their beds.

⁶ May the praise of God be in their mouths

and a double-edged sword in their hands,

⁷ to inflict vengeance on the nations

and punishment on the peoples,

⁸ to bind their kings with fetters,

their nobles with shackles of iron,

⁹ to carry out the sentence written against them—

this is the glory of all his faithful people.

Praise the LORD.

Romans 13:8-14: Living our lives through Jesus Christ

Paul has just been offering instruction about how one should respect to civil authorities. He even has a sense that secular institutions are also part of God's will and plan. We should pay taxes. Perhaps behind Paul's advice in 13:1-7 is a sense of the need for order in society. He does not allow his spirituality to be confined to just the church community or just to "spiritual matters". Responsible citizenship is important. Paul has learned well from his teachers. Among them there were likely to be those who stood under the influence of Stoic thought which placed great weight on order. It appealed to Jews who were also concerned to perceive God's order or law in every part of life.

Having just asserted such conformity, Paul shows in 13:8 that his starting point is *something more than a concern for order*. Already in 13:5 he tries to move people beyond conformity through fear. In 13:8 he moves us beyond laws and commandments to attitude and behaviour based in love. That is the heart of his gospel and it also informs how he sees behaviour. Paul goes beyond the "oughts" of obligation which we might owe others (13:8). Approaching others with love and respect is the foundation. Stand on that foundation and you will fulfil and more than fulfil the Law. Paul had already made that point in 8:1-4. Love is more than an ideal. It is a fruit of the Spirit. It is the outworking of allowing oneself to be loved and of the process of liberation which that initiates, freeing us from our fears and guilt and preoccupation with ourselves so that we are available for life and love with others.

⁸ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet,"^[a] and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself."^[b] ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.

¹¹ And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So, let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. ¹³ Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. ¹⁴ Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

Matthew 18:15-20: Managing difficult situations – a warning against a preoccupation for order over forgiveness and tolerance

This seems a difficult reading, bent upon discipline and exclusion if people do not conform to ‘the standards’ set. The passage reflects an application of justice which incorporates the biblical provision that charges must be supported by at least two witnesses (Deut 19:15). The authority given the community to engage in such a process (18:18) is the same as that given to Peter in 16:19 and shows that binding and loosing has to do with interpreting Law/scripture and its implications for passing judgement.

But of greater importance still is the wider context. 18:21-22 contain Peter's question about forgiveness and Jesus' reply that forgiveness is possible not just 7, but 77 times. In other words, forgiveness is never to be abandoned. 18:23-35, the parable of the unforgiving servant, makes the same point. If this is not enough, the verses immediately preceding the disciplinary rule retell the parable of the lost sheep, only that it now applies it to the issue of what to do when a community member goes astray (18:12-14). Compassion seeks the lost. If we go back further to 18:6-10, we return to issues of discipline: abuses against God's little ones: children but also members of the community of little ones, the congregation. The whole chapter begins with the lesson about greatness: to humble oneself as a child.

In this wider context Matthew has set what may well have been a bit of sectarian traditional wisdom about how to deal with deviance. While its rough edges remain, it is now heavily qualified. Without revising it directly, Matthew has set it in a context where all the emphasis falls on compassion and forgiveness. Matthew is not abandoning the need to confront abuse. Matthew is not espousing the kind of phoney harmony which sweeps abuse under the carpet in the name of Christian peace. But it is clear that he is not prepared to abandon people to the scapegoating tendencies of communities, Christian or otherwise. That said, it is also the case that when community members have genuinely erred, that the act of forgiveness should be conscious and clear, that the offender, must be aware of the gravity of the offence in order to understand that he or she is really forgiven and liberated and there is an implicit requirement for penance, meaning acknowledgement. As Karl Rahner, the German theologian of the late 20th century, put it this way, “Only the one who is forgiven understands he is a sinner”. In other words, the act of forgiveness when really offered and really received as such, is an act of liberation for all.

¹⁵ “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

¹⁸ “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

¹⁹ “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

The Gospel of the Lord

Praise to you Lord Christ

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

Hymn for Meditation: As the Deer pants for water, so my soul longs for you (Taryn Harbridge)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8cWB1fGXF8>

Some thoughts.... A Conversation

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

THE SACRAMENT

Hymn: I am the bread of Life (Sr. Suzanne Toolan, Notre Dame University Folk Choir, South Bend, Indiana)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dX4uC3a7RC8>

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving

The Lord be with you
And also with you

Let us lift up our hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Thanks and praise, glory and honour are rightly yours

Our Lord and God,

For you alone are worthy.

In time beyond our dreaming,

You brought forth light out of darkness,

And in the love of Christ your Son,

You set women and men at the heart of your creation.

And so we praise you,

with the faithful of every time and place,

joining with the choirs of angels and the whole creation

in the eternal hymn

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,

Heaven and earth

are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest

Through him,

in him

and because of him,

We affirm the Church's faith

Christ has died.

Christ has risen.

Christ will come again.

Institution

Lord's Prayer

Let us say the Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins,

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial

and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours,

now and forever. Amen.

하늘에 계신 우리 아버지여

이름이 거룩히 여김을 받으시오며

나라이 임하옵시며

뜻이 하늘에서 이룬 것 같이

땅에서도 이루어지이다.

오늘날 우리에게 일용할 양식을 주옵시고

우리가 우리에게
 죄 지은 자를 사하여 준 것 같이
 우리 죄를 사하여 주옵시고
 우리를 시험에 들게 하지 마옵시고
 다만 악에서 구하옵소서
 대개 나라와 권세와 영광이
 아버지께 영원히 있사옵나이다. 아멘

Breaking of the Bread

Christ is the bread of joy
 Who shares food with sinners.

Christ is the cup of life,
 Who revives the faint-hearted

Let us receive what we are;
 Let us become what we receive.

Lamb of God

Jesus, Wisdom of God,
have mercy on us

Jesus, Word made flesh,
have mercy on us

Jesus, Liberator of creation
grant us peace.

Communion

Distribution

Prayer after Communion

Blessed be God who calls us together

Praise to God who makes us one people

Blessed be God who has forgiven our sin

Praise to God who gives us hope and freedom

Blessed be God whose word is proclaimed

Praise to God who is revealed as lover

Blessed be God who alone has called us

We offer all that we are and all we shall become

Prayers of the People

At the end of each prayer/petition the one who prays offers the words; “Jesus,” only the forgiven understand their brokenness”, and the response is “help us live restored lives”.

Closing Hymn: O for a thousand tongues to sing (Lyngham, Charles Wesley) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-dEfvz6Vms>

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

May the Road Rise to Meet You (Students of the University of Jena, Germany)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtmOAnti3Vo>

May the road rise to meet you
May the wind be at your back
May the sun shine warm upon your face
May the rain fall softly on your fields
And until we meet again May God hold you in the palm of his hands.

May the sun make your days bright
May the stars illuminate your nights
May the flowers bloom along your path
Your house stand firm against the storm
And until we meet again
May God hold you in the palm of his hands.