

24th Sunday in Pentecost 2020

Readings - Judges 4:1-7, Psalm 123, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30

Introduction - What does it mean to have 'freedom in Christ?' Obviously freedom does not mean that we can do anything we want. For example, believing in the Messiah does not give us the freedom to steal someone's car. Freedom in Christ is not the right to do what we want but rather the ability for us to do something right. We all still have to contend with the consequences to our actions, both good and bad. As Paul says in Galatians 6:7, 'Do not be deceived ... a man reaps what he sows'.

Common Theme - This week's readings give us pause to reflect on that concept of reaping what we have sown and the consequences of our actions. Obedience is part of our faith walk with Jesus. Jesus says, 'Blessed is he who hears my words and obeys them' (Luke 11:28). There is a blessing in walking in obedience and a consequence for not doing so. We are free to choose, however we are not free from the consequences of our choices.

Hebraic Context - Jewish exegesis on the concept of reaping and sowing always observes both the physical and spiritual consequences of one's actions. For example, in Genesis 26:12 we read that 'Isaac planted crops ... and reaped a hundred fold'. A midrash on this verse explains the spiritual aspect by saying that Isaac sowed his tithe into good deeds and reaped righteousness from heaven, which gave lasting merit to his descendants. Consequences, both good and bad, can carry over into subsequent generations. Paul reflects this effect of spiritual reaping and sowing having lasting ramifications when he writes, '... they (the Jewish people) are beloved on account of the Patriarchs' Romans 11:28.

Reading #1; Judges 4:1-7 - The activity of doing evil in the eyes of the Lord results in the occupation and oppression of Israel under Jabin, the king of Canaan. This does not mean that God rejected Israel, rather that actions have consequences even for His people. Deborah, who joins the line of women prophets in the Bible, leads the people to freedom. The Bible notes many women as prophets, Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Noadiah (Neh 6:14), the wife of Isaiah and Anna the prophetess in the Temple in Acts. Many of the prophets of old called the people to be attentive to their deeds in light of impending judgment from God.

Reading #2; Psalm 123 - This psalm is one of the collection known as the Psalms of Ascent, Psalms 120-134. So called because they all start with the subscription *שיר למעלות* - a song of ascent. This is a short prayer for mercy for relief from contempt, ridicule and oppression. The psalm does not explain the source of, or reason for, the persecution. Instead, simply acknowledging to whom to look to for help. To receive mercy we must look to the Lord whose throne is in Heaven. Jesus reminds us that we reap what we sow when He declares, 'Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy' Matthew 5:7.

Reading #3; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 - The apostle here warns the Church against complacency. The consequence of not being busy in the kingdom carries the danger of falling asleep and missing the 'thief that comes in the night'. The danger is to believe that all things are going well without appreciating the concept of reaping what we sow. Thus, Paul issues a call to action, to be 'alert and self controlled' (verse 6) and to practice 'faith and love' (verse 8). These are actions and our armour against doing nothing. Sowing these actions will produce the result of not reaping in 'wrath but [receiving] salvation' (verse 9). We are to encourage each other with this promise from God (verse 11).

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Reading #4; Matthew 25:14-30 - The parable of the talents pertains to those who are in the Kingdom of Heaven. That is, those in the household of faith and under the kingship and rule of God. God entrusts us with His kingdom. Which, as we see from these parables, He never takes away until the end. The choices we make will have consequences on us, others and the kingdom. This parable of course is not about money. It is about action. The servants know their master and the master knows his servants and proceeds to portion out talents appropriately. Like the servants, we too know what God expects from us. Yet too often we do the opposite, and this produces judgement. Note that the bad servant did nothing, he had no engagement in the work of the kingdom. Faith is a verb, inaction from the king's perspective is akin to rebellion, hence the strong action by the king in this parable.

Hebraic Perspective - Faith in Hebrew is the word *Emunah*. The word first appears in the book of Exodus 17:12. Interestingly the word faith is not found in the book of Genesis. In its first appearance in Exodus the word is translated as steadfast. *Emunah* is not a noun, it is a gerund. A gerund is a form of a verb, in English it is the addition of adding '-ing' to a word. So walk becomes walking, read becomes reading and faith becomes 'faithing'. A gerund is a verb that you are doing. A better translation of *Emunah* would be faithfulness. Being faithful implies action. Hence James will write in his epistle that faith without works is dead! Our faith in God and in His Messiah should coincide with our actions and behaviour. As servants of the King we are accountable to the King for those actions. As Habakkuk says, 'the just shall live by his faithfulness' Habakkuk 2:4.

ACNA Addendum

Zephaniah 1:7,12-18 - The intent of the prophet is to announce the approaching judgement of the day of Lord. While the book is full of fire and brimstone, Zephaniah's prophecy ends on a positive tone and includes the pronouncement that God will be merciful in restoring Judah. Today's passage sees God searching Jerusalem with a lamp bringing consequences and punishment to people who had fallen into complacency and idolatry. Light will always reveal the deeds of darkness and in the end all our actions are made known. We cannot hide anything from the living God who is light and life. This should instill in us a strong sense of awe and reverence and a desire to pursue holiness.

Psalms 90 - This psalm is attributed to be a prayer of Moses. It is a prayer of the community of faith, and that includes us, since the opening verse acknowledges that God is our dwelling place. Despite our belief in God we had done something to provoke the anger of the Lord (verse 7). While the psalm does not explain what we have actually done to deserve God's wrath, it does teach us that there are consequences to our sin. As we meditate on those thoughts the prayer is to 'gain a heart of wisdom' (verse 12). Wisdom, as it is explained by Jesus, is 'proved right by her deeds' Matthew 11:19. Sowing obedience through wisdom will reap a beautiful reward as verse 14 says that the Lord will satisfy us in the morning with His unfailing love.

Further Reading - for an in-depth study of faith as 'faithfulness' Raymond E. Brown's book on the gospel of John is magisterial:

Brown, Raymond E. *The Gospel According to John*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2008.

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