

A reading from the book of the prophet Ezekiel.

Pause - and look up at the assembly

Thus says the Lord:

“You object, O House of Israel!

You say, ‘The way of the Lord is unfair.’

Hear now, O house of Israel:

Is my way unfair?

Is it not your ways that are unfair?

When the righteous person turns away from their righteousness
and commits iniquity,
they shall die for it;

for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die.

Again, when the wicked person turns away
from the wickedness they have committed
and does what is lawful and right,
they shall save their life.

Because that person considered and turned away
from all the transgressions that they had committed,
they shall surely live;
they shall not die.”



Pause for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

A reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Philippians.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Brothers and sisters:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ,

any consolation from love,

any sharing in the Spirit,

any compassion and sympathy,

then make my joy complete:

be of the same mind,

having the same love,

being in full accord and of one mind.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,

but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

Let each of you look not to your own interests,

but to the interests of others.

Let the same mind be in you

that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death –

even death on a cross.

Therefore God highly exalted him

and gave him the name that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

Pause for **THREE** seconds

then look up at the people

and say SLOWLY:



GOSPEL READING – A 26

The Lord be with you.

And with your spirit.

A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord

Jesus said to the chief priests and elders of the people:

“What do you think?

A man had two sons;

he went to the first and said,

‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’

He answered, ‘I will not’;

but later he changed his mind and went.

The father went to the second and said the same;

and he answered, ‘I am going, sir’;

but he did not go.

Which of the two did the will of his father?”

They said, “The first.”

Jesus said to them,

“Truly I tell you,

the tax collectors and the prostitutes

are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

For John came to you in the way of righteousness

and you did not believe him,

but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him;

and even after you saw it,

you did not change your minds and believe him.”



The GOSPEL of the LORD.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

SCRIPTURES IN DEPTH

Reading I: Ezekiel 18:25-28

Ezekiel is well known for his insistence upon individual responsibility for sin. In earlier days Israel had barely recognized a distinction between a person and the community. The overall picture was one of communal solidarity, with emphasis upon the corporate consequences of individual guilt (e.g., “punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation” in the Decalogue [Ex 20:5]).

The destruction of Israel’s national institutions during the Exile accelerated a new emphasis on the individual, though it had begun to appear even earlier: Parents and children shall be put to death “only for their own crimes” (Dt 24:16; cf. 2 Kgs 14:6).

The change must, of course, be understood precisely as one of emphasis—not as a denial of the older idea of solidarity but as a corrective.

Both aspects —individual responsibility and corporate solidarity—have to be held together in tension, and it requires a finesse to know just when one or the other aspect has to be given priority.

These verses bring out another aspect of Ezekiel’s doctrine of responsibility. This is that a person is free at any time to turn from wickedness to righteousness and vice versa. In each case, that person will be judged by the new life to which he or she has turned, not by his or her previous life.

This is perhaps an oversimplification, but it fits in with the parable of the two sons in today’s gospel.

Responsorial Psalm 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14

This psalm is an individual lament. The psalmist is oppressed by his enemies but is equally aware of his own sin. He calls upon God to deliver him from his enemies by remembering not his own sins but God’s own mercies, and to lead him in the right way after deliverance.

This psalm forms a suitable response to the reading from Ezekiel. Both passages view a person’s life as bisected into past and future by the present moment. The past is characterized by sin, the future is filled with hope for righteousness.

In the present moment a person is thrown utterly upon the mercies of God—an aspect of the matter that Ezekiel, in his emphasis on personal responsibility, tends to overlook. The psalm corrects this.

The refrain, “Remember your mercies, O Lord,” calls attention to the very important biblical conception of remembrance. In modern parlance, to remember means simply to recall mentally an event of the past.

In the Bible, when God remembers, he does not merely recollect a past event but brings it out of the past and makes it effective in the present. Thus, the mercies that God performed in the past become renewed as present realities.

This concept is very important for our understanding of the Eucharist. “Do this in remembrance of me” means not only that we recall in our minds the messianic sacrifice, the supreme act of God’s mercy, but that in response to the Church’s action, God will make present that sacrifice.

As was well said by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission in 1971:

The notion of memorial as understood in the passover celebration at the time of Christ—i.e., the making effective in the present of an event in the past—has opened the way to a clearer understanding of the relationship between Christ’s sacrifice and the Eucharist.

The eucharistic memorial is no mere calling to mind of a past event or of its significance, but the church’s effectual proclamation of God’s mighty acts. ...

In the Eucharistic Prayer the church continues to make a perpetual memorial of Christ’s death; and his members, united with God and one another, give thanks for all his mercies, entreat the benefits of his passion on behalf of the whole church, participate in these benefits and enter into the movement of his self-offering (reprinted in *Worship*, January 1972, 46:3-4).

The refrain “Remember your mercies, O Lord” is thus a highly suitable chant for the Eucharist.

Reading II: Philippians 2:1-11

The longer form of this reading includes the great christological hymn which, following ancient tradition, is read on Passion Sunday (the reader will find comment on the hymn there).

Whether we opt for the longer or the shorter form, it seems clear that today both comment and homiletical treatment should concentrate upon the ethical exhortation that it is the purpose of the hymn to reinforce.

But we cannot ignore the hymn entirely. Apart from the interpretation of the hymn itself, there is a controversy among contemporary exegetes over its relation to the exhortation. Does the hymn merely present Christ as an example?

In that case, the drift of thought is: Let your relationship with other Christians be marked by unity, love, humility, consideration for the interests of others. In so doing, you must display the same attitude that Christ showed when he humbled himself to become man and to die on the cross.

That is the way in which the passage has normally been taken. Karl Barth, however, popularized—at least among the Germans—another interpretation.

It depends upon a different rendering of the final phrase in the short form of the reading: instead of “which was in Christ Jesus,” it reads “which you have in Christ Jesus.”

Such a variant rendition is possible because there is no verb in the Greek for “was” or for “you have”; it simply reads “which in Christ Jesus,” allowing the reader to understand either “was” or “you have.”

If we understand “you have,” it gives a different meaning to “in Christ,” namely, the characteristic Pauline sense of “in Christ,” sometimes called “mystical,” though Barth himself would have repudiated the term.

In this interpretation the pattern of Christ’s life, namely, the pattern of humiliation-glorification, is not a model for Christians to imitate but a pattern with which Christians are brought into conformity by their incorporation into Christ and their life in him.

It is difficult to decide which is the correct interpretation. Barth’s at least has the advantage of giving to “in Christ” its normal Pauline sense of treating Christ not merely as an external example but as the source of redemptive life.

Gospel: Matthew 21:28-32

The saying at the end the reading (Mt 21:32) is paralleled in Lk 7:29-30, and therefore it must have become attached at some stage in the tradition to the saying about the tax collectors and prostitutes (Mt 21:31b).

It is clear that the latter phrase, which occurs in both sayings, attracted the saying about John the Baptist to the comment on the parable. Then coalescence of the two sayings must have taken place prior to Matthew, because Matthew is responsible for placing the whole pericope in sequence with the question of authority (Mt 21:23-27), connecting the two traditions by means of the catchword “John the Baptist” (Mt 21:25, 21:32).

We thus have three levels of exegesis: (1) the Jesus level, consisting of the original parable of the two sons with Jesus’ comment, Mt 21:28-31a; (2) the oral tradition, consisting of the parable with an extended comment, Mt 21:28-31b and 21:32; (3) the evangelist’s understanding, indicated by his combination of the parable plus extended comment with the pericope about the question of authority, 21:23-27 + 21:28-32. The exegete has to try to interpret the parable on all three levels.

Jesus evidently told this parable (some have thought that this was the original nucleus of the parable of the Prodigal Son) to vindicate his proclamation of the Good News of the kingdom against his critics: “The tax collectors and prostitutes who receive me now will enter into the kingdom of God at the last judgment rather than you who criticize me for consorting with them.” The parable is a proclamation of God’s mercy for sinners.

The addition of the saying about John the Baptist gives the parable a surprising and not altogether apt twist. Matthew, however, has straightened out this awkward state of affairs by sandwiching the pericope between the question of authority and the wicked husbandman.

By doing so, he makes it one of a series of three comments upon the Jewish authorities’ response to God’s purpose throughout salvation history. This response was one of constant rejection, from the time of the prophets through John the Baptist to Jesus himself (and of course also, in Matthew’s own perspective, to the postresurrection mission of the church).

For Matthew, it justifies his own church’s abandonment of the mission to Israel and its concentration on preaching to the Gentiles (Mt 28:16-20, and see especially Matt 21:43, added by Matthew to the third of his three pericopes in Mt 21:23-45).

Reginald H. Fuller