

The Church's prayer for this Sunday – The sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Lord of creation,
whose glory is around and within us:
open our eyes to your wonders,
that we may serve you with reverence
and know your peace at our lives' end,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 27th September 2020, the sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Psalm 25: 1-8

**Prayer for Guidance and for Deliverance
Of David.**

- ¹To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
²O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
³Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
⁴Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.
⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
⁷Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!
⁸Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

Today's reading from the Old Testament: Ezekiel 18: 1-4; 25-32

Individual Retribution

¹⁸ The word of the Lord came to me: ²What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?' ³As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. ⁴Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.

²⁵ Yet 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? ²⁶When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. ²⁷Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. ²⁸Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. ²⁹Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is unfair.' O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?

³⁰Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. ³¹Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³²For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Today's reading from the gospels: Matthew 21: 23-32

The Authority of Jesus Questioned

²³When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' ²⁴Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?"' ²⁶But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' ²⁷So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

The Parable of the Two Sons

²⁸ ‘What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” ²⁹ He answered, “I will not”; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, “I go, sir”; but he did not go. ³¹ 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. ³² 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.

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

**A reflection for the sixteenth Sunday after Trinity from Cathy Michelle,
Methodist lay preacher, member of the ministry team in Toft and of the
Lordsbridge Team chapter**

Texts: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 26 to end; Matthew 21:23-32

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Pity the poor sermon writer! Sometimes the readings set by the lectionary look too dull, too difficult or too dreadful! And often the one from the Old Testament seems to have absolutely nothing to do with the one in the New, as if they'd been chosen by the random finger of a person in blindfold. And then there's the task of making such apparently random texts seem relevant to our present circumstances. What to do?

So first we have our passage from Ezekiel addressing the Jews at a time of grave national crisis, their defeat and exile after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in by the Babylonians in 586BC. And then we jump centuries to a passage from the time of Matthew's church in the late 1st century AD; a gospel composed in Syria and addressed to a church in transition, looking towards the non-Jewish world for converts. This was written after another national catastrophe, the destruction of the temple again, this time by the Romans in AD 70.

So is this the only thing these 2 readings and our world today have in common – crisis, destruction and upheaval!? Let's look closer. There are three key themes that bind these texts together; these are dispute, morality and authority.

Commentaries will tell you that our Ezekiel passage is constructed as a 'disputation oracle' that begins by quoting a well known saying (in this case about the fathers, the

sons and the sour grapes) and then presents carefully constructed legal arguments against the saying and its message, a message that is allowing Ezekiel's contemporaries to blame their present troubles on the sins of a previous generation. You'll need to read it all again to see how thoroughly the prophet demolishes such an argument.

Similarly in Matthew's account, Jesus also sets up a disputation. He refuses to answer a question put to him and instead throws back a completely different one to his opponents. They then argue between themselves about the true origin of John the Baptist's authority and take the only face-saving way out of the dilemma he's set them, by saying that they just don't know. Jesus follows up immediately with a puzzle about the father and his 2 sons; and poses another question that his hearers do get right this time.

These two quite different disputes are about the same central themes, they're about personal morality and about where the ultimate authority, which defines both goodness and sinfulness, lies.

Both passages agree and proclaim that God is that authority. Ezekiel himself, like John the Baptist and Jesus centuries later, speaks with the same divinely inspired authority, because as a prophet he utters 'the word of the Lord' when he emphasises that all lives belong to God and that all humans are answerable for their own actions. And he makes clear from his Jewish perspective what good, righteous action consists of. It is to worship God alone and reject all idols in life, whatever these may be. It is to be disciplined and pure in sexual and family relationships; to deal honestly in money and business; not to oppress the poor; to feed the hungry and clothe the needy and to obey the law and administer it justly. In all circumstances, whether at times of peace or of national chaos, this is God's way and will. It is also the way to life and gives life. For those who sin and refuse to repent and be reconciled with God, there is only death says the prophet.

In a similar vein, Matthew (and he alone among the 3 Synoptic gospels) gives us Jesus's parable of the father, his two sons and their vineyard. It's easy to understand which son 'did the will of his father' and easy to read that the father here stands for God. As in Ezekiel, authority lies with God whose will is clear – he needs workers in his vineyard - the world, ones who will actually do the heavy lifting. Again, like the legal examples the prophet presents, here is a son who initially says 'no', who acts sinfully towards the father, but who then repents and goes to do his bidding. He has chosen goodness and life. In contrast stands the other son, the easy 'yes-sayer', who fails to act righteously when the chips are down; not for him the Kingdom of Heaven.

And look at the twist in the tail of Matthew's account. If the only thing necessary for a person to be acceptable to God is their willingness to believe and to live the faithful, moral life (such as that taught and lived out by Ezekiel, John the Baptist and Jesus himself), then anyone who chooses that righteous way is part of God's kingdom. Like

the prodigal son in another parable, the rejects, tax-collectors, lepers, foreigners, anyone and everyone, can embrace the life and joy of God. And even we can be one of their number.

If we were to time-travel back to Ezekiel's day, or join the chief priests and elders of the people in Jesus's, or even the new Jewish-Christian congregations of Matthew's era, we might well recognise that messy, strife-ridden, disputatious, troubled and troubling human reality, one sometimes turned upside down by wars or pandemics, that is common to all ages. And in the light of that, we may heed the Biblical call to us about the importance of personal responsibility and the need for moral action in our world; a call that also assumes the centrality of belief in God who is the Source of all goodness. We are called now, in our time, to right action and commitment to justice for all. We have our own crises to deal with, as they did. Some are obvious, they are the climate emergency (see David Attenborough and the recent BBC film 'Extinction') and the Covid pandemic which is linked to this. Other problems are endemic; they are the slow burning, hard to extinguish blights on our life such as racial and wealth inequality; war and hunger; the rise of repressive governments and the alt-right; conspiracy theories and fake news; the undermining and remoulding of 'authority' and the breakdown of trust in those who hold it, to mention but a few of our many modern challenges.

But in the midst of all this we have to ask again, and answer, the question posed to Jesus - the one he refused to answer. Where do we find authority in this world? There are many who claim it, who wield its powers in society and who easily betray it. But we have to look to an authority that is rooted in God's nature, one alluded to by prophets such as Ezekiel and by Jesus. As we look around us we can name so many who have shown this true authority, whether it be Mahatma Gandhi, Edith Cavell, Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, or more recently Ruth Bader Ginsberg of the American Supreme Court. Endless names could be added to this shining list. These people are authoritative because they are faithful to the highest values, their actions reflect the justice and love of God. So we believe that the Authority calling us to life and hope, to belief and good action in times of trial, is God - and for us, God seen and known in Jesus. It is this that can re-make our world and our society. It will carry us too and enable us to live well and serve our neighbours in the months ahead.

In the name of Christ. Amen