

BIBLE STUDY SERIES, YEAR A, RCL
Proper 19-Last Pentecost
Parish of the Good Shepherd, Waban

(These question sheets use brackets—[]—to mark verses that were included in the old Lectionary but are not used in the Revised Common Lectionary. You will not hear them on Sunday, but they will add to your understanding.)

Our Sunday readings follow a three-year cycle, constructed around the first three Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke. (These are called the “Synoptic Gospels,” as if seen through a common eye.) Each year we read more or less straight through one of these, with variations for special seasons. (The Gospel of John, which transforms history into poetry, is used to heighten times of extraordinary celebration, such as Christmas and Easter.) The new Lectionary year begins on I Advent. This is Year B, and our Gospel is Mark.

The weekly reading from Hebrew Scripture (the “Old Testament”) during the post-Pentecost season usually offers two options. The first respects the integrity of Hebrew Scripture by moving through books sequentially; in Year A, it features stories from Genesis through Judges. This is the option we’ll be using this season. (The second option, the one carried over from the previous Lectionary, uses passages chosen to echo or enhance some theme in the Gospel reading, though sometimes it’s a challenge to guess what the editors had in mind!)

Each of these options for Hebrew Scripture has its own psalm, chosen to match the theme of the week. The psalms would have been read aloud by the congregation in the synagogue service, and understood as a corporate prayer, personally relevant for at least some individual members. No questions about the psalms are included here.

The “New Testament” reading usually comes from one of the Epistles, and like the Gospel readings it tends to go straight through one book at a time. There is usually no deliberate connection between its contents and the other readings, but it is startling how often they seem made for each other anyway. In special seasons, selected passages from the Book of Acts or Revelation may be used instead.

Proper 19: Sept. 13

Exodus 14: 19-31

Ps 114

or Exodus 15: 1b-11, 20-21

or Genesis 50: 15-21

Romans 14: 1-12

Matthew 18: 21-35

Exodus 14: 19-31

For your information

Two traditions are combined here: God's presence as an angel, and as pillars of cloud/fire.

Questions

1. How does God intervene in this story? Since "a strong east wind" can in fact force water back, do you see this as originally a natural event or a supernatural one? In either case, how would it have seemed to the formerly enslaved Israelites?

Exodus 15: 1b-11, 20-21

Questions

1. In this long hymn, how is the event described by the grateful singers? What details heighten the drama?

2. How does God appear in this hymn? What conclusions do the Israelites draw about God?

3. Are the Israelites monotheists yet?

4. What might be the importance of including Miriam's short hymn, since it essentially repeats what has already been said?

Genesis 50: 15-21

For your information

The death of Jacob closes a major chapter in Israel's history, and is told so as to underscore what has already passed and what is the foundation for the future. As he requested, Joseph buries him at the site of his ancestors' graves, in the land of Canaan. Joseph's own death is noted in v. 26, and his burial in Egypt.

Questions

1. What is the brothers' fear when they approach Joseph? Is it a valid fear?

2. How does Joseph respond? How does he sum up God's place in the story, and God's ability to turn harm to good? Have we seen evidence of God's power to do this before? What pattern is provided for Israel and her relationship with God?

Romans 14: 5-12

For your information

Many Jewish Christians continued to be concerned about rules governing the rituals around eating. By Jewish law, certain kinds of food were prohibited at certain times. The church in Rome included both Gentile and Jewish Christians.

V. 8 is one of the opening sentences for the BCP rite for the Burial of the Dead.

Questions

1. How does Paul turn the apparent tension over dietary laws into yet another lesson in the inclusiveness of God? What principle embraces all sorts of choices and convictions? What do Christ's death and resurrection have to do with Paul's ringing proclamation? How does he understand the reason why Christ "descended to the dead"?

2. What are the implications of this theological understanding for how we treat our "brother or sister"?

Matthew 18: 21-35

For your information

Here is another "kingdom of heaven" parable. Chapter 13 had many of them, and there will be more.

To a Jew of that time, "seventy-seven" was like "10 to the nth power," i.e. an infinite number.

A denarius was a day's pay for the average worker. A talent was worth about 6,000 denarii.

Questions

1. What similar themes do you see between this passage and the one from Romans? What particular applications do you think Jesus had in mind? How might his words later prove relevant to Peter himself?

2. If we are required to forgive without limit, why are we told that "his lord" tortured the merciless slave, and that God will do the same to us? Do you think that if God has limits to what is forgivable, we might too?

3. What does this passage add to our understanding of the kingdom of heaven?

Proper 20: Sept. 20

Exodus 16: 2-15

Ps 105: 1-6, 37-45

or Jonah 3: 10-4: 11

Ps 145: 1-8

Philippians 1: 21-30

Matthew 20: 1-16

Exodus 16: 2-15

For your information

The Israelites are now somewhere on the Sinai Peninsula, a bleak wilderness. “Fleshpots” are large pots of stew.

Questions

1. What is the Israelites’ chief complaint about life in the desert? What do they say they would have preferred to this? How does their behavior reflect on their readiness for the Promised Land?
2. What does God promise to do for the Israelites and why? What “test” is attached to this gift? How have Moses and Aaron been finding themselves tested as leaders? How do they defend themselves? How is God’s promise fulfilled?

Jonah 3: 10-4: 11

For your information

For the beginning of Jonah's story, see Proper 14. Jonah then went to Nineveh as ordered, and his warnings were so successful that Nineveh repented and changed.

Questions

1. What is the result of Nineveh's repentance, as seen in 3: 10? Why is Jonah upset by this outcome? What do you think he's waiting for, in his booth?
2. What point is God making with the bush that flourishes and then dies? Does Jonah get the point? What lesson might there be here for would-be prophets?
3. How might the theme of this passage be connected with last week's themes? Do you see any possible connection between these themes and the journey that is now getting close to Jerusalem?

Philippians 1: 21-30

For your information

Any religion which proclaims a glorious life after death is faced with the quandary of what to say about the importance of life on earth. Some early Christians deliberately sought martyrdom, even death at the hands of highway bandits, so that they would be with Christ immediately; and we have recently heard a similar expectation from suicide bombers. The Church has sometimes been

accused of ignoring the need for changing the temporal world, by focusing on the afterlife as compensation for all present suffering.

The church at Philippi was the first that Paul established in what is now Europe. It is in Macedonia, just north of the Aegean Sea. Evidently it had always struggled against considerable opposition.

Questions

1. How does Paul describe his own tension about life and death? How does he resolve it?
2. Do you think that his instruction to the Philippians in v. 27 is meant to have a special moral force because of his choice in vs. 24-25? Would they hear it that way?
3. How does Paul make vss. 28-30 particular to the Philippians, and to himself? What is their apparent situation, and how are they to understand it? How is Paul himself able to understand it? Why does he consider it a privilege?

Matthew 20: 1-16

For your information

Jesus has now left Galilee and is headed directly toward Jerusalem, by the safer route east of the Jordan. **In the following weeks, look for ways in which the readings build toward the climax that will come in that city.**

Here is another "kingdom of heaven" parable, of which there were several in Chapter 13. This is the most fully developed. It follows directly from 19: 30, and repeats that same line at the end.

Questions

1. Like many parables, this one is clearly intended to unsettle us. If the story is taken literally, how do you react to it? What pushes us beyond its literal meaning?
2. Where do you find yourself in this story? Is the landowner intended to be like God, and if so, how? What role do the laborers seem to play? Have you heard others in the Gospels complain about their treatment, for similar reasons?
3. Is this parable about justice, or something else?
4. Does this parable seem to be a clear illustration of the line that begins and ends it? Why, or why not?

If you have time

--Read Mt. 20: 17-19, the passage which immediately follows this one. Do you think there is a reason for this sequence? What if anything does this next segment have to do with the parable? Is the detail that Jesus is now "going up to Jerusalem" relevant?

--Keep going. Read Mt. 20: 20-28, and ask yourself these same questions. Note that immediately after this section we are told that Jesus is now "leaving Jericho," which is only 15 miles from Jerusalem--a day's walk.

Proper 21: Sept. 27

Exodus 17: 1-7

Ps 78: 1-4, 12-16

or Ezekiel 18: 1-4, 25-32

Ps 25: 1-8

Philippians 2: 1-13

Matthew 21: 23-32

Exodus 17: 1-7

For your information

The Israelites are still in the Sinai wilderness, far south of Canaan. Massah ("test") and Meribah ("find fault," "quarrel") would have been known in later times as desert oases.

Questions

1. What familiar behavior do you find in the Israelites here? How does Moses respond this time, to them and later to God? How does God help?
2. What is the significance of the names which Moses give to the springs?
3. What is the importance of the question in v. 7? Have you ever asked it?

Ezekiel 18: 1-4, 25-32

For your information

For notes on Ezekiel, see Proper 18. This reading comes from the pre-exile period, when Ezekiel was warning Israel of what was to come.

An ongoing theme in Hebrew Scripture is that Israel's God is a God of justice; but the meaning of "justice" keeps changing. Sometimes God apparently considers it just to respond to a serious offense with a much more serious punishment, even one that extends to the offender's family or community, as if sin spread like a stain and contaminated anyone close to it. "An eye for an eye," the familiar OT standard of justice, is comparatively merciful, though it sounds harsh to us. But

there are other kinds of "justice" suggested here and there, and they will emerge more clearly in the NT.

Questions

1. What standard of justice is suggested in vs. 1-4? How is it different from the one quoted from Jer. 31: 27-30? Does it seem just to you?
2. In vs. 25-32, God's voice is highly indignant! Why? Does the standard of justice which God expresses here seem fair to you? Is it what you expect, or hope for, from God? Why, or why not? What is the effect of v. 32a?

If you have time

--Compare this passage to Ez. 33: (1-6) 7-11. You will find many similarities. Why do you think the creators of our lectionary chose these very similar passages only three weeks apart? Are they somehow important to this phase of Jesus' journey? What stage in Israel's understanding of God might these passages represent?

Philippians 2: 1-13

For your information

Vs. 6-11 are written in what seems to be a poetic, hymnic form, and are usually printed that way. This may be a hymn of the early Church, and may even be borrowed and adapted from another religious tradition.

Jesus' "taking on the form of a slave" may mean choosing to become fully human, with all human limitations, including mortality. Crucifixion was a punishment "reserved for slaves and those who had totally forfeited all civic rights," and so represented "the extremity of human abasement" (Jerome Commentary).

The "name" bestowed upon Jesus is "Kyrios," "Lord." This name was used as a substitute for "Yahweh" in Greek translations of Hebrew Scripture, since the name of God was considered too holy to be spoken or written. A theological dilemma for the early Church was how this name might be applied to Jesus without suggesting a second God.

Questions

1. This passage begins with Paul's exhortations to his beloved and usually obedient Philippians. What does he ask of them? What would make his joy complete? Do you think that the picture he presents here fully sums up an ideal Christian community?
2. How does the "Christ-Hymn" support Paul's call to the Philippians? What is there in Christ's example that is to be their model, and ours? What would it mean to "grasp" or "exploit" one's equality with God? What kinds of identity might we be tempted to exploit?

3. What relationship between God and Christ do you infer from this hymn? How does it explain Jesus' being called "Kyrios"? How might this solve the problem of two "Gods"?

4. What would it mean for us to "work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling"? In what ways might our salvation be up to us--not completely dependent on God?

Matthew 21: 23-32

For your information

Jesus is now in the Temple in Jerusalem, and is surrounded by chief priests and elders, who have already challenged his authority. He has apparently not been ordained a rabbi.

Questions

1. Why does it matter that the chief priests and elders are the ones who question Jesus' authority? In what tone do you imagine them speaking? Why does Jesus not answer except with another question?

2. How does Jesus' question neatly trap them?

3. Here Jesus is, at the very center of hostile power; yet he addresses to his enemies a parable that is bound to enrage them even further, and makes his point as explicit as possible. Why does he do what appears to be such an unnecessarily self-destructive thing?

Proper 22: October 4

Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Ps 19

or Is 5: 1-7

Ps 80: 7-14

Philippians 3: 4b-14 [15-21]

Matthew 21: 33-43

Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20

For your information

These commandments were originally quite short; elaborations were added later.

The "First Commandment" of v. 2 is actually the foundation of them all. If it is observed, the rest follow.

Idols representing pagan powers were common in the ancient world.

Questions

1. What identification does God give to deserve Israel's attention?
2. As you look at each commandment, how do you think it is related to the "First Commandment"? Would it be possible to see them all as a way of understanding what it means not only to love God, but to love one's neighbor?

Isaiah 5: 1-7

For your information

Isaiah spoke to the Southern Kingdom of Israel during the tense period when the Northern Kingdom was being overcome by Assyria.

Questions

1. The "singer" of this passage proclaims it a love-song. Who is the singer? Who is the beloved? What happens between them? What are the consequences to be?
2. Does this sound like a love-song to you? Is there any evidence of true love in it? If so, where? Do human lovers behave this way? Does God?

Philippians 3: 4b-14 [15-21]

For your information

Many students of Paul's writing have identified in him a tension between "already" and "not yet." Christ has already accomplished a radical change in the human situation, and our baptism has already made us participants in it; but obviously we are not yet Christ-like, and there is much work still to be done, both in ourselves and in a gravely imperfect world. Here Paul tries to balance on the edge of that tension, unlike certain false teachers against whom Paul has been warning the Philippians in Chapter 3.

Questions

1. Where does Paul believe himself to be in the process of attaining his goal?
2. What does it mean that "Christ Jesus has made [Paul] his own? What is Paul's evidence? Could we say the same?
3. Does the "because" in this sentence mean that Paul is motivated to press on because of gratitude, or that it is Christ's very act that enables him to press on at all, rather than falling into indifference or rebellion? Why do some end up as "enemies of the cross," and what exactly does this mean in our own terms? Can you think of examples to match the vivid images of v. 19?

4. Who is the "our" of v. 20? Does it include us? What is "the body of our humiliation"? Does Christ's power of transformation extend to all humankind, so that not only "all things" but all **people** will ultimately be subject to Christ? What is "now," what "not yet"?

Matthew 21: 33-43

For your information

Absentee landlords were common in Jesus' time; their relationship with their tenants was intended to be based on mutual trust between unequals, the original concept of "covenant," though either party could betray that trust.

Questions

1. What pushes us beyond the literal story here? Who is represented by the landowner? by the tenants? by the slaves? by the son? Why is the landowner so foolish as to keep sending more representatives to their death?
2. What sort of justice is contained in the Jewish leaders' response to Jesus' question in v. 41?
3. Instead of immediately interpreting the parable, as he did in the previous one, Jesus quotes Ps. 118: 22-23. To what purpose? How does it fit the situation? How does it represent justice--or not?
4. Clearly this parable is intended to suggest the Crucifixion. Does Jesus mean it to predict his own crucifixion? Or is this a more general account of what happens to people like him? Why would he speak to his enemies this way, at this time?
5. What is the effect of assigning this reading--which seems appropriate for Lent--late in the Pentecost season, when we're approaching Christ the King Sunday and Advent?

Proper 23: October. 11

Exodus 32: 1-14

Ps 106: 1-6, 19-23

or Isaiah 25: 1-9

Ps 23

Philippians 4: 1-9 [10-13]

Matthew 22: 1-14

Exodus 32: 1-14

For your information

Aaron, Moses' brother and chief assistant, has been put in charge of the people while Moses is on the mountain.

Questions

1. What does Aaron do while Moses is gone? Why do you think he does that? Why do the Israelites respond so enthusiastically? What do they make of the golden calf?
2. What warning does God give to Moses? What threat does he make against the people? What argument does Moses make to dissuade God? Why does God change his mind? What does this show about God, and about Moses? What pattern is revealed here, that might appear again?

Isaiah 25: 1-9

For your information

Here again is Isaiah speaking to Israel's Southern Kingdom as it apprehensively watches the Northern Kingdom being engulfed by the Assyrian Empire.

Questions

1. The first three verses praise God for destructive acts. Why? Would you do the same? Who are the "strong peoples," and why would they too glorify God?
2. Verses 4-5 distinguish between God's treatment of the poor and the fate of "the ruthless" and "aliens." How are they different? How are they related? Who are the poor and needy, in Isaiah's time? What is the "rainstorm," the "heat"? What is "the song of the ruthless"? How would you apply these images today? What definition of justice is in these verses?
3. Verse 6 begins a vision of God's eschatological (end-time) promise. What images are used to describe this joyful time? Which are literal, which figurative, and why is each chosen? Are they appropriate images for our time too? If so, to whom would they particularly appeal? Do you long for such a "kingdom," or something different?
4. Who are "all peoples" in vs. 6-7? Is this vision meant for all of us, or just for "his people" of Israel who are now in "disgrace"?
5. Why would Isaiah present this vision to people who have not yet suffered the punishing exile which he seems to think they richly deserve? Where is justice in this?

Philippians 4: 1-9 [10-13]

Questions

1. What sense do you get in vss. 1-3 of Paul's particular relationship with the Philippians? What is the effect of his naming his co-workers in Philippi, including two women? In v. 2, why do you suppose he urges them to "be of the same mind in the Lord"?

2. . Paul concludes his affectionate letter with gentle words of instruction and reassurance. What can it mean to tell Christians who are facing constant hostility, "Do not worry about anything"? Would this be an appropriate message to preach in the shadow of Sept. 11 (9/11)? COVID? Climate change?

3. According to Paul, what should we do instead of worrying? Do you think it's good advice? What will be the outcome if we follow it? Why does the peace of God "[surpass] all understanding"? (See BCP p. 339.)

4. What specific things in your experience would you think of under the headings on Paul's list (v. 8)? This list leaves out anything unpleasant or evil. Do you think it's a recipe for naivete or denial? A cheap route to a superficial peace?

5. How do you think Paul's comments on his own experience are related to the more general comments of vs. 4-9? How might they apply to us, to how we understand our own lives?

Matthew 22: 1-14

For your information

Here is yet another "kingdom of heaven" parable. Others are in Chapters 13, 18 and 20. Again, the audience is "the chief priests and the Pharisees," in the Temple.

Questions

1. What pushes us beyond the literal meaning of this story? What sort of "kingdom" is this? Who might be the king, the son, the slaves, the unwilling guests, the guests who come, the underdressed guest?

2. Do the guests who won't come deserve what they get? Why? What about the guest who didn't wear a wedding robe--does he deserve such harsh treatment? Should we treat people who come to church in jeans and a sweatshirt that way? What's going on here? Where do we fit into the story?

3. How does this story add to our understanding of the kingdom of heaven? How does it build up the tension in Jerusalem? Can you see any connection with the passage from Isaiah?

If you have time

--Compare Matthew's version of this story with the one in Lk 14: 16-24. What is alike, what different? (The reasons given in Luke for not accepting the invitation would ordinarily have been considered quite legitimate in that culture.) What different purposes do you see?

Proper 24: October 18

Exodus 33: 12-23

Ps 99

or Isaiah 45: 1-7

Ps 96: 1-9, (10-13)

I Thessalonians 1: 1-10

Matthew 22: 15-22

Exodus 33: 12-23

For your information

Disclosing one's name was equal to disclosing one's whole identity. Because it would have been arrogant to address God this way, Israel customarily used an abbreviated form of the divine name — YHWH—and did not speak it; and the NRSV has followed the same principle by substituting "the Lord" for God's name.

"Presence" in v. 14 is literally "face," and may refer to the Ark of the Covenant.

Questions

1. Moses and the people have come a long way from Egypt, but they're not home yet. What uncertainties does Moses express to God? Why is he bewildered? What evidence does he ask for?
2. How might it be comforting and restful to the people to have God's presence, perhaps in the form of the Ark, as their companion on the way to Canaan? What would it do for Moses? What might give us the same sort of reassurance as we move toward new and possibly dangerous things?
3. In v. 16, Moses seems to define a special role in history for Israel with her God. Do you see that indeed Israel has been "distinct" in this way, or is this an old notion that has been replaced by a much larger view of God's call?
4. What further privilege does Moses request in v. 18? How does God respond to it? What may Moses not see, and why? What is he permitted to see? Is that enough? Would you make the same request?

Isaiah 45: 1-7

For your information

This reading is from "Second Isaiah," written in a time of Israel's restoration. Cyrus, pagan king of Persia, liberated the Babylonian exiles and restored them to Palestine. In v. 1, he is spoken of as "anointed one"—"messiah," a term otherwise applied only to Israelites. This entire passage is addressed to him.

Questions

1. How does God intend to use Cyrus, according to this passage? Is Cyrus aware of God's intentions? What are the implications of God's choice? What message will it carry?

2. In Second Isaiah's understanding, what is the connection between God and historical events? Have you seen this theme before in Hebrew Scripture? What sort of God is this, and is God's self-description comforting?

I Thessalonians 1: 1-10

For your information

Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, on the Aegean Sea, southeast of Philippi. The book of Acts tells us that Paul founded that church just after leaving Philippi, and that initially he worked within the synagogue there, although this letter is apparently addressed to Gentile converts (1: 9). Persecution was a constant threat.

This letter is considered to be one of Paul's earliest, even perhaps the first that we have, and so the earliest writing of the New Testament. As you read it, look for the meaning-making and church-building that have happened in the fewer than twenty years since the Crucifixion.

Questions

1. How does Paul describe the history and accomplishments of the Thessalonians? What has been the effect of their faithfulness? What is Paul's evidence that God has "chosen" them? Do you read the evidence this way?

2. What role does Paul believe that he has played among these people? What definition[s] of "evangelism" might you draw from this passage?

Matthew 22: 15-22

For your information

The Pharisees were scholars of the law (as found in the Torah), which they regarded as the core of Israel's identity. They were men of high status at the time. In general, they loved a good argument about the meaning of Scripture, believing it to be a religious discipline; bright young scholars were welcomed.

Little is known about the Herodians; their name suggests that they supported the family of the hereditary Jewish king Herod.

The payment of taxes to the Roman empire was a factor in the delicate balance by which Jews and their Roman occupiers managed to get along. Most Jews compromised by making taxes a secular matter, separated from their religious observances, and would have viewed tax resisters

as troublemakers; but they despised the Jews who collected those taxes. A denarius is a day's wages for ordinary workers.

Questions

1. How do these opponents approach Jesus? What is their manner? Why? Why do you think the Pharisees and the Herodians have joined forces?
2. Why do they ask this question? What "malice" is implicit in it?
3. What is the meaning of Jesus' answer? Why are his opponents amazed?
4. According to Jesus' answer, the emperor's head is stamped on the coin, which therefore should be given to the emperor. By that standard, what should be given to God? On what is God's image stamped?
5. V. 22b ends the conversation with the Pharisees. What is the implication of their departure? Where do you think they are going?

Proper 25: October 25

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12
Ps 90: 1-6, 13-17
or Leviticus 19: 1-2, 15-18
Ps 1
I Thessalonians 2: 1-8
Matthew 22: 34-46

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

For your information

Moses has delivered a long address to the people. Now he goes to a range of mountains just east of Jericho. From there he can see much of the Promised Land.

Joshua is one of the very few remaining men of the original group who escaped from Egypt. Many have died off in the desert, because their whining and doubting made them unworthy of entering the Promised Land. (And of course 40 years have passed!)

Questions

1. Why would God show Moses the Promised Land but forbid him to enter it? Has he committed some offense, or is this just an old tradition about why he in fact died before arriving there?
2. How did the Israelites respond to his death? What has been said about him since then? (Cf. Numbers 27: 12-23)

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 15-18

For your information

“Holy” here means “set apart, “ for a special purpose that is God’s will for them. All other commandments in the chapters that follow spell out the particular rules that add up to holiness.

Questions

1. On what does Israel’s holiness depend? How might all of the 613 “laws” of orthodox Judaism follow from that?
2. What does each of the laws in vss. 15-18 have to do with the sort of God who governs Israel?
3. What is the context for v. 18? Where will we see it again?

I Thessalonians 2: 1-8

Questions

1. This passage continues Paul's account of why he and his companions deserve the Thessalonians' trust. What are his reasons? Do they make sense to you? What does it mean to "make demands as apostles of Christ"? As opposed to what?
2. Why might Paul have thought it necessary to say these things? Can you imagine a situation in which our clergy, or another congregation's, would talk this way?

Matthew 22: 34-46

For your information

The Sadducees were a group of high status, closely associated with the Temple, which they considered the essential center of Jewish religious life and identity; most of them were priests. They did not believe in resurrection or an afterlife.

According to rabbinical teaching, the world “hangs on Torah, Temple service, and deeds of loving kindness.”

Verse 37 quotes Deut. 6: 5. Verse 39 quotes Lev. 19: 18.

Questions

1. The Pharisees have come back! Why? What do they seem to want to achieve with their question? What do you suppose they think of the answer?

2. We often think of vs. 35-40 as containing the essence of Jesus' teaching, a radical departure from OT theology; yet both parts of Jesus' reply come from Hebrew Scripture! Is there anything new here?

3. Verses 41-45 contain a somewhat convoluted argument which is often used to "prove" the exalted nature of the Messiah. Can you follow its reasoning? Does it make sense to you? Does it prove anything? If so, what?

4. Why does this episode leave everyone afraid to ask Jesus more questions? What new stage in the story is marked by this fact? Have you met people who left you speechless like this? If so, because of what?

If you have time

---Find the two OT lines quoted here; do their contexts add anything to your understanding of why Jesus chose them?

Proper 26: October 25

Joshua 3: 7-17

Ps 107: 1-7, 33-37

or Micah 3: 5-12

Ps 43

I Thessalonians 2: 9-13, [17-20]

Matthew 23: 1-12

Joshua 3: 7-17

For your information

Joshua has become the Israelites' leader after Moses' death. With the help of the prostitute Rahab, his spies have entered Jericho and brought back helpful information to Joshua, camped at Shittim.

The list of tribes to be driven out is formulaic, and often repeated; these are the various groups that lived in Canaan before the Israelites were established there. The "twelve tribes of Israel" were probably a much later affiliation of tribes around a central altar and a single God; only a few of them would have been from the group that had come from Egypt.

Questions

1. What plans does God announce to Joshua on the banks of the Jordan? What rituals does Joshua command in preparation for the crossing?

2. How might this passage, containing some elements that come from another time and some details that stir our memories, serve to encapsulate Israel's history and her dependence on God? How does it establish Joshua as the new Moses?

Micah 3: 5-12

For your information

Micah was a little younger than Isaiah, living at the time of the Southern Kingdom's anxiety about being overrun by Assyria. Unlike Isaiah, he came from a small town, and was unaccustomed to the big city.

Questions

1. What two categories of people does Micah identify in v. 5? How is their attitude determined by their situation?
2. In which category does Micah think he belongs? What will happen to the others? What behavior will bring these dire results, and how will it affect Israel's fate?

I Thessalonians 2: 9-13, [17-20]

Questions

1. Here Paul continues to recount his virtuous behavior toward the Thessalonians. Does it sound like the conduct of an ideal evangelist? Again, why does he need to tell them all this?
2. Is v. 13 somehow connected with what precedes it?
3. According to vs. 17-20, what do the Thessalonians mean to Paul? Is there anything about what you have read so far in this letter that sounds like a man at the beginning of his work, as scholars believe Paul was when he wrote it?

Matthew 23: 1-12

For your information

Scribes were a class of professional exponents and teachers of the law. The Gospel differ as to exactly how they fit into the higher levels of Jewish authority; were some of them priests, others not? some of them Pharisees, others Sadducees? It's not clear.

All the Jewish authorities--Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees--are now gone. Jesus is left with "ordinary" people: the crowds, and his disciples.

Phylacteries are "little leather boxes worn on the left arm and forehead, containing strips of parchment bearing the text of Ex. 13: 9, 16; Deut. 6: 4-9, 11: 18-20" (NOAB). Some observant Jews still use them, in literal obedience to the instructions contained in these passages.

Num. 15: 38-40 and Deut. 22: 12 prescribe fringes to be worn at the four corners of men's clothing, as reminders to obey the law.

Questions

1. What does Jesus mean, that scribes and Pharisees "sit in Moses' seat"? What does he think of their suitability for this position, and why? What very different approach does he recommend to his followers, and why?

2. Who might be our present-day equivalents of scribes and Pharisees? What parallel behavior do they display? Are we tempted to make the same mistake? In what ways? How might we change to prevent it?]

All Saints' Day

[Note: When All Saints' Day does not fall on a Sunday, its lessons usually preempt those for the following Sunday. Both sets are included here, so as not to miss part of the Lectionary sequence.]

Revelation 7: [2-4] 9-17

Ps 149 *or* Ps 34:1-10, 22

I John 3: 1-3

Matthew 5: 1-12

Revelation 7: [2-4], 9-17

For your information

The book of Revelation is part of a long tradition of apocalyptic literature--a vision of the time when God's reign is fulfilled. Its author, whose identity is not known, probably completed the book during the reign of the emperor Domitian, who insisted on being called by divine titles and on making his images objects of worship. Christians refused, and incurred the first widespread persecutions, resulting in exile or death.

Some of the imagery in this book may contain carefully veiled references to Domitian himself. Some of it--especially the many symbolic numbers, the stark contrast of evil and good, and the strange, dramatic creatures--would be familiar to those who knew the apocalyptic genre. But it seemed strange and extreme enough that it was not definitively included in the canon of Holy Scripture until quite late.

The number 144 was a mystical number for Israel, because of the original twelve tribes. Twelve times twelve was both a holy and a virtually infinite number. Likewise, v. 12 includes seven terms of praise--another mystical number.

Questions

1. As strange as this passage is, it carries echoes of other NT material. What scene is suggested in v. 9? How is v. 17 reminiscent of Is. 25: 1-9? What other details are familiar to you, and from where?
2. How much, and in what way, does this passage match your sense of heaven? Does it seem intended for certain kinds of people, in certain situations, or is its joyful confidence appropriate for everybody?
3. Who is the "I" of v. 14? Why do you think the elder asks him that question?

I John 3: 1-3

For your information

This letter was apparently written by a person of authority in the Johannine community who was particularly concerned with false teaching.

Questions

1. What echoes do you hear in this of the Gospel of John?
2. If this community is made up of "God's children" now, what might you imagine is still to come for them?

Matthew 5: 1-12

For your information

The Beatitudes appear only in Matthew and Luke. Luke has Jesus standing on a level place (a plain), surrounded by multitudes, and speaking while looking up at the disciples. Matthew has him and his disciples leaving the crowd behind, and climbing a mountain for a more private teaching. His version is considerably expanded from Luke's; see Isaiah 61: 1-4 for the source of his additions.

Questions

1. Do you see any significance in the different "stagings" of this event?
2. Familiar as this passage is to us, can you see anything in it that might have seemed scandalous at the time? Or even now? To whom?

3. Is there anything INTRINSIC in poverty, hunger, grieving that might lead to some sort of blessing?

4. We have already seen this passage on IV Epiphany of this year. Why do you think it is repeated here? Do the two days have anything in common?

If you have time

--Compare Luke's version (Lk 6: 17, 20-23). In addition to the geography, are there any differences in content?

Proper 27: Nov. 1

Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25 (and read 3b-13)

Ps 78: 1-7

or Wisdom of Solomon 6: 12-16 (or 17-20)

or Amos 5: 18-24

Ps 70

I Thessalonians 4: 13-18

Matthew 25: 1-13

Joshua 24: 1-3a, (3b-13,) 14-25

For your information

This section tells a (probably condensed) story of Israel's twelve tribes, whose history did not begin in Egypt but rather converged as a confederation at Shechem, drawn there perhaps by the focus of one God and the dramatic power of the Exodus story.

This chapter describes one of several covenants that God made with Israel. Each of them was between a powerful God and a dependent people, and relied on God's promise to stay with and protect his people. But they needed to be renewed as circumstances changed, and their terms were somewhat different.

Questions

1. What are the phases of Israel's history recounted here? How does God claim to be involved in each?

2. What does God demand in return? What are the various tribes' choices? What does Joshua declare to be his choice?

3. What choice do the people make, and for what reason? Why does Joshua assert, "You cannot serve the Lord"? What is the danger for them? How are they "witnesses against [them]selves"? What must they do now, and what do they receive as structure for their obedience?

If you have time

--Compare Joshua's warnings about the gravity of this covenant with Amos' representation of God's fury in Amos 5: 18-24. Would Israel have been better off without the covenant and the responsibility it implied?

Wisdom of Solomon 6: 12-16 (or 17-20), found in the Apocrypha

For your information

This document was composed not by Solomon, but in Greek by "an unknown Hellenistic Jew" (NRSV), probably toward the end of the first century BCE. It was not unusual for an author to claim the authority and reflect the inherited tradition of a revered figure.

By that time, Israel's hopes and assumptions about her future had been dashed repeatedly, so it was thought that God had departed from them and the spirit of God was gone from the land.

Questions

What are the attributes of Wisdom as described here? Is Wisdom analogous to the Holy Spirit or not? How might she be of use to a ruler, or to anyone struggling in hard and deeply discouraging times?

Amos 5: 18-24

For your information

Amos was a country kid, a "dresser of sycamore trees." Unlike most prophets, he was called to preach not to his own people (in Judah) but to the center of power up north. In the mid-8th century BCE, things seemed to be going very well for Israel, so when he warned of great trouble to come because of Israel's ungodly ways, he was expelled and sent back where he came from.

Verse 21 ff. is an example of "dialectic negation," a rhetorical device that exaggerates negations in order to emphasize a point.

Questions

1. Why might the confident northerners "desire the day of the Lord"? In fact, what will it be like for them?
2. What in particular does God "hate" about Israel's behavior? Why would these failings be especially hard for them to admit? What does God want from them instead?
3. What does this passage have to say to us?

If you have time

--Compare this passage to Joshua's warnings about the risks of the covenant in Joshua 24: 19-24.

I Thessalonians 4: 13-18

For your information

Even this early in his ministry, Paul has some strong convictions about the meaning of the Resurrection. He speaks them "by the word of the Lord;" that is, they are divine revelation, not merely what he himself thinks.

Questions

1. What does Paul tell the Thessalonians about "those who have died"? Why do you think he finds it important to say this? How is it to come about?
2. Do you accept this view of what happens to those who die--and to those left alive? Some Christian groups take these words literally. What truth, if any, do you find in them?
3. Do you see any connection between this passage and the others for today? How does it fit the momentum of the season?

Matthew 25: 1-13

1. Here is yet another "kingdom of heaven" parable! What pushes us beyond the literal meaning? Who might be the bridegroom? the bridesmaids?
2. What do you think of the "ungenerous" behavior of the wise bridesmaids? Are we to admire them, or not?
3. What do you make of the bridegroom's behavior, in shutting the door to the feast and refusing to admit--or even to recognize--the foolish bridesmaids?
4. Where do you find yourself, and your sympathies, in this story? What do you think we are meant to learn from it? What does it add to our sense of the kingdom? to the themes of the season?

Proper 28: Nov. 8

Judges 4: 1-7

Ps 123

or Zephaniah 1: 7, 12-18

Ps 90: 1-8, (9-11), 12

I Thessalonians 5: 1-11

Matthew 25: 14-15, 19-29

Judges 4: 1-7

For your information

This passage continues the account of Israel's betrayal of the covenant and its consequences. Jabin is not actually "king of Canaan," but rather of Hazor, a city in Galilee, positioned close to trade routes.

The judges served as governors of the various tribes before they were united enough to have a king.

Questions

1. What seems to be Deborah's qualification as a judge? How is she regarded?
2. Deborah promises that God will ensure Israel's victory over a vastly superior force, that has 900 chariots while Israel has none. What does this show about Israel's God as understood at that time, and about the force of the covenant in spite of Israel's offenses?

Zephaniah 1: 7, 12-18

For your information

Zephaniah lived in the time of King Josiah (mid-7th century BCE), who brought about important reforms in Judah; but this passage comes before the reforms, when the Jewish religion had become seriously compromised.

Questions

1. Here Zephaniah predicts imminent devastation of Judah. We have seen many other such predictions. What are the specifics of this one? Is anything distinctive about it?
2. What is the effect of reading this passage one week before Christ the King Sunday, at the end of the Pentecost season?

I Thessalonians 5: 1-11

For your information

A pressing question among early Christians was: When will the promised return of the Messiah happen? When will the end come? Paul's letters show some uncertainty; sometimes he seems to think it will be soon, sometimes not. Less than twenty years after the Crucifixion, it was a lively debate, as Christians faced not only their already oppressive lives but the further misery of persecution.

Questions

1. What seem to be Paul's expectations about the end time here? To what does he compare its coming?
2. What assurances does he give the Thessalonians as they await the end time? Can you see two apparently contradictory statements, in v. 6 and v. 10? How would you resolve them?
3. What does v. 11 have to do with the rest of the passage? How does it define Christian community, and what is its foundation?

If you have time

--Compare I Cor. 7: 25-31, where Paul gives advice based on how little time remains before the end.

Matthew 25: 14-30

For your information

And one more kingdom parable--this one apparently intended to be closely related to last week's.

A talent was worth "more than fifteen years' wages of a laborer" (NOAB).

Questions

1. Once again, a master and his slaves. Does this story make literal sense? Why, or why not? Who might be the master, who the slaves? Why do you think the master gives unequal amounts to the slaves?
2. Clearly, the first two slaves could have lost everything. If they had, how would the master have reacted? Was the risk itself praiseworthy, or what?
3. Do you have reason to think that the third slave was right in his assessment of his master (v. 24)? How does the master respond to it? How does this exchange affect your understanding of who the master is? How is it possible to justify v. 29?
4. V. 30 was not included in the previous version of the Lectionary. Now it is. What might be the reason for each choice? What do you make of it, especially if the master is meant to represent God?
5. What difference does it make that this parable is explicitly about the kingdom, rather than about ordinary life?
6. Next week is Christ the King Sunday. Can you now look back over previous weeks (starting with Proper 20) and see the pattern that leads to this moment?

Proper 29 (Christ the King): Nov. 15

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, [17], 20-24

Ps 100

or Ps 95: 1-7a

Ephesians 1: 15-23

Matthew 25: 31-46

For your information

We have now reached the end of the post-Pentecost season, in a sense "the end of the road." It might seem to be time for Good Friday; increasingly our readings have led us in that direction. But instead, we have a Sunday of triumph, celebrating Christ the King. And then we begin a new church year, and start awaiting the child. Why do you think our year is structured that way?

The psalms appointed for this week are known as the "Venite" (Ps 95) and the "Jubilate" (Ps 100), named after the first word of each one in Latin. One of these is always read in the service of Morning Prayer.

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, [17], 20-24

For your information

This passage is part of Ezekiel's "oracles of hope," spoken to a people in exile.

Questions

1. What familiar images do you find here? How would they be heard by people who had always trusted God to win their victories for them but are now exiles? Do you find anything distinctive about Ezekiel's use of this traditional material?
2. How do you think this passage might fit us? Do its assurances fit any of our sufferings or struggles?
3. What does it mean, to "feed [the fat and the strong] with justice"? What sort of justice might this be?
4. Who might be "the fat sheep and the lean sheep"? Who is the "you" in the vivid image of v. 21? What are their horns?
5. What does God promise to his flock? What role does David play, and why might he be mentioned so prominently some 400 years after his life?

Ephesians 1: 15-23

For your information

This letter is probably not by Paul, but by a later writer who incorporates the language and theology developed over decades.

Questions

1. In the writer's prayers for the Ephesians, what are his particular hopes for them? What is the nature of the Christ they may come to know, and the promised results of knowing him?
2. What are "the eyes of [our] hearts"? Do you believe that yours is "enlightened"? What is "the hope to which he has called you"?
3. How might this passage be said to summarize the "kingship" of Christ?

Matthew 25: 31-46

For your information

Note that this passage follows immediately from last week's reading, as climax to the Pentecost Gospel readings rather than a special excerpt for "Christ the King."

Questions

1. Here is another vision of the end of time; perhaps it could be called Matthew's final "kingdom of heaven" parable. What sort of kingdom is this? What sort of king?
2. How does this vision match, or differ from, Ezekiel's? Paul's, in I Cor 15? How does it match yours, or not? What sort of justice is represented here?
3. As you consider all of the passages assigned for this Sunday, do you find that they fully express your sense of Christ's kingship? Or is there any element missing?