

NOTES FOR SERMON OR HOMILY

EXODUS 14: 19-31

PSALM 114

ROMANS 14: 1-12

MATTHEW 18: 21-35

Introduction

The readings for Education Sunday this year contain two particularly well-known stories, both of which, in different ways, address major themes which relate to change. One is about an external change and the other about an internal change. Education is all about change and while this is not always apparent, particularly when dealing with older children and adults, it is very obvious with younger children.

The Hebrew scriptures

Both the Exodus passage and the Psalm address one of the great events in biblical history: the parting of the Red Sea and the salvation of the children of Israel from the forces of Pharaoh. Deeply significant for Jews and Christians, this story has generated a great deal of scholarly debate and no little humour.

One story that is told is of a discussion between three Rabbis concerning a Jewish legend where, as a sign of faith, God required someone to step out into the waters before they parted. The first Rabbi tells the story and, recounting how the crowd had gathered at the water's edge, offers the name of a man, who bravely stepped forward. The second nods and says, "Well, he didn't so much step as fall, but still the waters parted". The third Rabbi says, "No, he neither stepped nor fell – he was pushed, but still the waters parted".

The point of this story is not just to make us smile, but to remember that God's grace is greater than we can expect or understand and that things don't always occur quite in the way we expect or would desire: a lesson all have learned, sometimes painfully, during the months of school closure and lockdown.

The New Testament Passages

Here we meet two well-known but difficult stories both relating to forgiveness. Peter has learned a lesson about forgiveness and, seeking clarity asks, "If someone sins against me how often should I forgive? Seven times?" He clearly sees this as a generous number but gets a reply which actually means more than it appears, and which clearly stumps and disconcerts at least some of the early editors of Matthew's gospel. There are two versions of Verse 22. One has Jesus saying, "Not seven, but seventy-seven," and the other, "Seventy times seven." It is easy to see an early editor saying something like, "Seventy-seven seems a reasonable number to indicate generosity but seventy times seven is just ridiculous.". This, however, misunderstands the phrase. The point

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of “seventy times seven” is not that Jesus is saying you must forgive 490 times. It is an example of what is called an “Aramaism”, a phrase translated literally from Aramaic into the Greek of the New Testament but which has a particular meaning in the original. “Seventy times seven” was the Aramaic equivalent of what we would call an infinite number. It is again an example of the generosity and grace of God which we are called upon to follow.

In Chapter 18 of Matthew, this is followed by a story that presents the consequences of a failure to do so. The servant with a huge debt refuses to forgive the servant with a small debt and reaps the consequences. Then Romans addresses a question that was clearly a point of difficulty for the early Church but also, albeit in a different form, for us today. Some of the first generation of Christians were converts from Judaism and others were gentiles. Some had been brought up to see some foods as special, particularly in the sense that eating them was forbidden. Also, some saw particular days as special. While the Jewish Sabbath is probably what is meant here, both the Greek and the Roman world had special sacred days when various activities and actions were either mandated or forbidden. Again, this passage addresses what must at times have been frustrating and worse. It is so easy to move, without necessarily realising we have done it from “they do things differently” to “they do things wrong”, and even into “they do wrong things”. It is at this point that we come back to the question of forgiveness, although perhaps as something to be sought, not something to be granted.

Conclusion

Exodus, the Psalter, Matthew and Romans all deal with the human condition and with the grace of God – sometimes as mediated directly and sometimes as mediated through us. In the context of Education Sunday it is perhaps valuable to remember that education is always a two-way process. Just as St Francis of Assisi reminded us that it is in “giving that we receive” so in these stories we remember that in forgiving we are forgiven and that in teaching we learn.

