

## 2023 October 1<sup>st</sup>. Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity.

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-7;

Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32.

You might have thought they'd be grateful, but they jolly well weren't. God had rescued the People of Israel from slavery in Egypt, now he was guiding Moses to lead them to freedom in the promised land, and all they are doing is complaining about the travel snacks. God has shown he has absolute control over water: he turned the Egyptian's water into blood; he turned back the Red Sea so that the people of Israel could cross over. You might have thought that they could trust him to provide water in the desert, but no, they complain that they are (literally) dying of thirst.

I wonder if we would have been any different? How often when the journey gets tough do we look around for someone to blame, and how often that someone is God. Although we know of God's saving acts throughout history, from Adam and Eve onwards, when we feel under pressure we often forget that God has a good track record of rescue and then we stop trusting in God to save us.

Perhaps we feel that God hasn't done much to save us personally - perhaps we've faced personal or family distress or even disaster, and we feel that God didn't do much. I wonder if sometimes it's harder for people who are basically comfortable, who can more or less manage to look after themselves and live the life they want by their own effort, that is people like you and me, I wonder if it's sometimes harder for us to discern where God has been at work. After all, if you can get everything you need and most of what you want just by exercising your bank card it's easy to ignore God's hand at work.

That's why the Psalmist reminds us that God commands his people to teach his history to their children. He reminds us that his mighty salvific deeds of the past are deeds for us too. It's common sense, really: if he had not saved our ancestors, we wouldn't be here today! The reminder of God's loving mercy to his people in every generation should inspire us with trust in him in this our generation.

But trusting in God doesn't mean that we automatically get what we want when we want it. The story of Moses bringing water in the desert is told in both Exodus (which we've read today) and Numbers. In Numbers Moses adds his own flourish to God's commandment, and although God

does provide the water God also chastises Moses. He says that Moses didn't trust God to just provide, Moses wanted to make it look like his work, and because of Moses' actions and the attitude that they reveal, Moses does not himself enter into the promised land.

If we remember the results, and not the author of our fortune, we run the risk of thinking that we have earned or deserved or in some way controlled the blessings we enjoy. And so we are pointed towards a very specific part of God's plan of salvation. The salvation for the whole world bought for us and offered to us by Jesus, the Saviour of the world. And yet Jesus, for all that he is God the Son, for all that through him all things were created and redeemed, for all that he is seated at the right hand of God the Father in heaven, for all that Jesus is, yet he is humble. He does not grasp at equality with God the Father, yet lays his power aside and comes to earth to suffer, endure and die.



When the People of Israel reminded each other of God and of his saving power, then they knew that he was with them, bringing them hope and help. When they forgot, got too big for their boots, thought it was all about them, then they forgot that he was with them to lead them, guide them, bring them to himself.

Jesus said "the tax-collectors and prostitutes are getting into the kingdom of God ahead of you." These were the people who knew that they deserved nothing of God, who knew that they must be humble before God, who knew that they could not ask or demand anything of God, and so who were able to receive God's saving love.

I wonder how often we remember all that God has done? I wonder how often we teach others all that God has done? I wonder how often we are humble enough to accept God's saving provision for us?

*Lucas van Leyden. Moses and the Israelites use water from the rock tempera on canvas (1527) [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#)*

## 2023 October 8<sup>th</sup> - Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity.

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19:7-end;  
Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-45.



Do you know all the Ten Commandments and can you put them all in the right order? I often ask people training for Christian ministry this question: most do know the Ten Commandments, but very few can get them all in the right order!

The first four commandments are about our relationship with God, instructing us to focus on the one, true God and not be distracted by other things or “gods”, and reminding us that we need to set aside time for God, the Sabbath day. Commandments five to ten are about how we live with those closest

to us, like parents and spouses, and with those who are less closely linked, our neighbours in general.

It's interesting that these rules, given by God and recorded in a holy book, are not just about “religious” stuff, but are also about everyday practical dilemmas, not lying in court, not stealing, not breaking up marriages and family life. It seems that for God, good behaviour covers every part of our lives, the “holy” and the “ordinary.”

The Ten Commandments are not the only laws in the Bible, in fact there are 613 laws in the Old Testament alone. However, each of these laws is connected with at least one of the Ten Commandments, as if the Ten Commandments give the basic requirement and the other laws work out what that requirement looks like in specific everyday situations.

Many of the laws in the Old Testament are still pretty close to the laws we use today (indeed, English law is based on Old Testament law; European law is based on Roman law).

Sometimes I get my ordinands (ministers in training) to compare biblical laws with laws made by other nations and they are surprised at how similar they are. Most people would agree that laws which prohibit murder, cheating in court or abusing poor and young people are good laws. Most people want to keep those laws, and most people succeed in keeping them most of the time. People may not be so sure that they need the “religious” laws, but St Paul reminds us that being good is never good enough, we always need to be God's people not just good people.

St Paul knew all the laws in the Bible and kept them, but when he met Jesus in his vision on the road to Damascus he realised that just keeping the laws had not brought him close to God, even if keeping the laws had earned him human praise as a jolly good chap.

When we think more about keeping up appearances than about keeping close to God there is always the risk that we'll start to cut corners, to keep the laws when people are looking and not keep them when no-one else is looking. It's a bit like following a healthy diet: we may manage to survive on a lettuce leaf and a morsel of salmon when we are eating in public, but when no-one is looking it's tempting to scoff that chocolate cake down quickly!

Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants is an extreme example of what happens when keeping up appearances matters more than keeping close to God. We can see that the son who was murdered is a reference to Jesus, but who are the workers who murdered him? The religious leaders and most ostentatiously religious people realised that this parable was about them - they claimed to keep the law, but they didn't keep close to God.

Sometimes when I read this parable it makes me feel uncomfortable; that's when I need to make sure that I'm keeping close to God and not just keeping up appearances. I wonder how our readings have made you feel today and I wonder what you will do about the readings and your feelings now?

**Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn. Moses Smashing the Tables of the Law**  
*Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen, Berlin*

## 2023 October 15<sup>th</sup> - Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity.

Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6;

Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14.

I wonder why we have read all of those verses from Philippians today? Who cares about an argument 2,000 years ago between two women with unpronounceable names? Surely the reading could have started with “Rejoice in the Lord always” and then we could have sung whichever version of that hymn we prefer!

But, I think it is important to remember these two ladies and their argument, even if we don’t know what the argument was about. St Paul tells us that they were very good people, who worked really hard for the sake of the Gospel, telling people about Jesus, praying, making their church welcoming for visitors. They were good and godly people, but they had an argument. St Paul wants to make sure that their disagreement doesn’t damage them, their work or God’s church.

When they are tempted to row, Paul asks them to remember all the qualities which Jesus shewed when he lived on earth and went about among us, all these qualities which the Holy Spirit grows in our hearts and minds. Paul asks Euodia and Syntyche (if you pronounce them You-o-dear and Sin-tick-ay you will be very close to the Green pronunciation), Paul asks Euodia and Syntyche to keep on doing the things that they have learned and received and heard and seen in him, to keep on living like St Paul who keeps on living like Jesus.

Sometimes we do disagree with people in church, whether in our congregation, or in another one of our four churches, or in the Diocese or national church. Disagreement is part of life, and a good argument, where you look at the facts rather than shouting at each other, can be a way of shaping ideas and helping us to work out what to do. Paul is asking these ladies “to be of the same mind in the Lord”, which is more than just asking them to think the same thing, or even to think different things, but not to argue. He is asking both of them to seek God’s view and to live God’s way. Seeking God’s view and living God’s way may well involve us in discussion and reasoned argument as we reflect on scripture and what God is saying to us now. Being of the same mind in the Lord requires action and thought from all of us.

Sometimes seeking God’s mind, living God’s way, can feel like a lot of

hard work. Too much hard work, sometimes. That was the problem that the people of Israel found. They knew that God had rescued them from slavery and cared for them in the desert. But now they had been presented with the Ten Commandments, a reminder that they needed to



live a particular way to stay close to God. That looked like a lot of hard work, and so they made their own gods, statues of cows, that they could pat and pet and put away when

they didn’t want to think about them. It’s tempting to turn aside from the real God and to make our own god because our own god is likely to agree with us whatever we want to do, when the real God might want us to change what we think and do.

The parable Jesus told warns us of the risks we run when we ignore the real God. The people who were supposed to be close friends of the King, personally invited to his Son’s party, were too busy doing their own thing. And so, the King reached out, quite literally, to people who didn’t think they were his close friends, but who were not too busy doing their own thing to attend to him. This is a complicated parable - what on earth is going on in the last few verses? I think that one of the things that is going on is that the guest without a wedding robe has wandered in to the party, but isn’t taking any notice of what is really happening, he’s too busy doing his own thing to take any notice of the King.

There are disagreements and arguments in the worldwide church and probably in all our congregations. These need not be bad things, but they’ll only be good things if we let God guide our arguments so that we can be “of the same mind in the Lord.” I wonder which argument is in your mind at the moment and I wonder what God is saying about it right now.

**Lucas van Leyden. The Adoration of the Golden Calf. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam**



## 2023 October 22<sup>nd</sup> - Twentieth Sunday after Trinity.

Exodus 33:17-23; Psalm 99; 1

Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22.

I don't know about you, but I have a lot of sympathy with Moses. Who wouldn't want to see God for themselves, not just through the words of scripture, not just through images in stained glass windows or ideas in hymns and poems, but really to see him and not someone else's idea, to see him as he really is.

I feel so sad that Moses couldn't see God, but this story reminds me how different God is from me and anything else in all creation. God is so holy, so mighty, so majestic, so powerful, so special that my eyes aren't strong enough to see him. If I tried to look at God, or even to enter his presence I would crumple up and dissolve, I would die.

That sounds like a problem. How can we approach the living God in prayer and praise, in confession and supplication, in thanksgiving and hopefulness if we can't approach him? We cannot enter God's world. He is holy and sinless, we are most definitely not. What are we to do?

We cannot enter God's world, but God himself entered our world. Just a few weeks' ago we heard the wonderful reading from Philippians chapter 2 describing the Son of God laying aside his majesty to be born on earth, fully God but also fully man. Jesus' life and death and resurrection have made it possible for us to be set free from the sin that stains us. We can be filled with God's Holy Spirit so that one day we really will see God face to face, when his kingdom comes here on earth as it is in heaven.

That is what Paul is writing about in 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10. He gives thanks for the people in the church at Thessalonike. He thanks God for all the work that they have done to spread the news of God revealed to all mankind through Jesus' life, death, resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit of God. Paul rejoices in the change of life these people have enjoyed as they have longed to be imitators of Jesus, to be more and more like God, to be a living example of what happens when someone says "I will follow Jesus" and means it!

Paul gives thanks for all that has been and then asks for more! A bit like Moses, really, who gave thanks to God for rescue from Egypt, preservation in the desert and a new land for God's people to live in and then asked for more!

I wonder how often we ask for more? It's difficult, isn't it, because as children we are taught "don't ask for presents", and so it feels rather rude to say "thanks, God, now give me more." But that is what Jesus taught us to do when he taught us the Lord's prayer, to ask each day for our daily bread, to say thank you for what we have and then to ask for more.

There's a lot that can be said about our Gospel reading today, but I just want to pick up one idea, linked to our other readings and asking for more.

The Pharisees want to stir up trouble: either Jesus will say "you should give money to the foreign rulers" and then the people will riot; or he should say "you shouldn't give money" and then the soldiers will arrest him. But Jesus says "give to God what you owe him and to the state what you owe it" and the Pharisees don't know what to say next!



We don't have a lot of choice about giving to the state, for most of us tax is deducted at source, so that's done for us. We do have a choice about what we give to God, but how often do we think about how much to give and how often to give? How often do we look at what's in our purse or pocket at the end of the week and give God our leftovers. Perhaps, particularly in the current economic climate, we are worried that if we give too much to God in the collection plate we won't have enough for ourselves.

I wonder what would happen if we prayed "thanks for everything God, please give me more". Would we then trust him enough to plan giving our collection first and then buying everything from the leftovers, rather than giving God the leftovers? It's a thought, isn't it!

*image accessed 16/09/23 09.27.*

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## Reflection for 29<sup>th</sup> October 'Creation Sunday'

Readings (different from the published lectionary)

Genesis 1: 27-31a, Revelation 21: 1-8, Mark 16: 14-16

Few rational people can remain doubters that human activity is damaging the planet on a scale never seen before. Environmental catastrophes including floods, droughts, wildfires, crop failures and changing weather patterns all point to serious threats to human life on this planet, our only physical home.

These events are occurring more frequently, are more severe and longer lasting than ever before. The recent severe flooding in the UK emphasise that these events are not confined to 'elsewhere' – they are real and local. If we subscribe to the belief that God created the world and 'saw that it was good' then we cannot avoid the conclusion that 'all is not good' with our planet.

It is easy to conclude that we as individuals can do very little to change the situation. It is easy to conclude that the Christian church has so much less influence than it used to, so that if we do speak out who will listen? All four parishes of the partnership have taken the opposite view and each has signed up to the 'Towards Net Zero' initiative which seeks to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030. A whole variety of simple, achievable changes have been discussed and each parish has set itself to make 3 changes in the next year.

As part of this initiative, Sunday (29<sup>th</sup> October) has been redesignated as Creation Sunday and our joint service of Holy Communion at Kirtling will dedicate our actions and cement our commitment to change.

Why is the Christian response to climate change so important to us?

Firstly, because God gave us stewardship of all of creation (Genesis 1:28) we must act in obedience to his will and his gift.

Secondly because there is a prophetic element. Prophets were and are people who speak God's words for the world to hear, often in difficult and challenging circumstances. The future of our planet is the challenging circumstance of today and the voice of the church needs to be clear and loud.



Finally, there is a pastoral element: we need to take care of each other, and those whose lives are affected by climate change. This may include practical or financial help for charities, foodbanks and the like, but must also include changes in our own personal behaviours – how we shop, how we consume energy, and how we use transport. Not easy changes, but it is true that small changes individually make minimal difference, but collective small changes do add up to measurable effect.

There will be a Bible Study series (details elsewhere on this site) to follow during November and December which looks at the Christian Response to climate change in more detail. Do consider joining us.

*Let us pray:*

God our creator, create in us a new heart, a new understanding, a new way of living.

God our Redeemer, rescue us from the brink of disaster, open our eyes to see the dangers that lie ahead.

God our Sustainer, equip and energise us, to hold fast to the changes that we need to make. Amen.

Image: © <https://edinburgh.anglican.org/2023/02/net-zero-action-plan-consultation-launch-event/>