

Bible Study

For 16th Sunday after Trinity *(Proper 21)*

Ezekiel 18.1-4,25-32

Philippians 2.1-13

Matthew 21.23-32

Opening prayer

I'm grateful, Lord God, that you love me and care for me,
that Jesus lived and died for me.

I'm grateful that you are interested in me,
even me with all my faults and failings.

Thank you for sharing my life and my living,
for being within my hopes and dreams.

Thank you for giving me purpose and meaning.

Thank you for showing me how to live a life of goodness and truth, a life of caring and sharing.

Thank you for your generosity and abundance
even if I fail to see it.

Thank you, God, for being you
and thank you for making me, me. Amen.

Introduction

To the New Testament Reading

Paul asks the Philippians to regard others as better than themselves, and to look to the interests of others, rather than their own – following the example of Jesus, who took the form of a slave and died a slave's death...for others...for us. We are fortunate that we are not asked to go to similar lengths, but Paul asks us to have the same mind as Christ.'

Tray Bake Problem



As you can see, I have, at great expense prepared a 'virtual' tray bake cake for you, which has already been cut into pieces. Sadly, I have just realised that there are not enough pieces for everyone to have one each.

I would like to ask you to work out a way of sharing the cake with those who are missing out.

Consider

What are the results of your discussion and what were the consequences?

Old Testament: Ezekiel 18.1-4,25-32

<i>(New Revised Standard Version)</i>	<i>(The Message)</i>	<i>(Contemporary English Version)</i>
<p>¹ The word of the LORD came to me: ² What 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'? ³ As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. ⁴ Know 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.</p> <p>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? ²⁶ When 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. ²⁷ Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. ²⁸ Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. ²⁹ Yet 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?</p> <p>³⁰ Therefore 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. ³¹ Cast 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? ³² For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live.</p>	<p>¹⁻² GOD's Message to me: "What do you people mean by going around the country repeating the saying, The parents ate green apples, The children got the stomach ache?"</p> <p>³⁻⁴ "As sure as I'm the living God, you're not going to repeat this saying in Israel any longer. Every soul—man, woman, child—belongs to me, parent and child alike. You die for your own sin, not another's.</p> <p>²⁵⁻²⁸ "Do I hear you saying, 'That's not fair! God's not fair!'"</p> <p>"Listen, Israel. I'm not fair? You're the ones who aren't fair! If a good person turns away from his good life and takes up sinning, he'll die for it. He'll die for his own sin. Likewise, if a bad person turns away from his bad life and starts living a good life, a fair life, he will save his life. Because he faces up to all the wrongs he's committed and puts them behind him, he will live, really live. He won't die.</p> <p>²⁹ "And yet Israel keeps on whining, 'That's not fair! God's not fair.'</p> <p>"I'm not fair, Israel? You're the ones who aren't fair.</p> <p>³⁰⁻³² "The upshot is this, Israel: I'll judge each of you according to the way you live. So turn around! Turn your backs on your rebellious living so that sin won't drag you down. Clean house. No more rebellions, please. Get a new heart! Get a new spirit! Why would you choose to die, Israel? I take no pleasure in anyone's death. Decree of GOD, the Master.</p> <p>"Make a clean break! Live!"</p>	<p>The Lord said:</p> <p>² Ezekiel, I hear the people of Israel using the old saying, "Sour grapes eaten by parents leave a sour taste in the mouths of their children."</p> <p>³ Now tell them that I am the Lord God, and as surely as I live, that saying will no longer be used in Israel. ⁴ The lives of all people belong to me—parents as well as children. Only those who sin will be put to death.</p> <p>²⁵ You people of Israel accuse me of being unfair! But listen—I'm not unfair; you are! ²⁶ If good people start doing evil, they must be put to death, because they have sinned. ²⁷ And if wicked people start doing right, they will save themselves from punishment. ²⁸ They will think about what they've done and stop sinning, and so they won't be put to death. ²⁹ But you still say that I am unfair. You are the ones who have done wrong and are unfair!</p> <p>³⁰ I will judge each of you for what you've done. So stop sinning, or else you will certainly be punished. ³¹ Give up your evil ways and start thinking pure thoughts. And be faithful to me! Do you really want to be put to death for your sins?</p> <p>³² I, the Lord God, don't want to see that happen to anyone. So stop sinning and live!</p>

Reflection and Bible notes

Old Testament: Ezekiel 18.1-4,25-32

Ezekiel speaks God's word to Israel at a time of crisis, when Israel has been defeated, Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed, and the people – including the prophet himself – exiled as captives of a foreign power. The message is a traditional call to repentance. Ezekiel sounds harassed, and the language is not that easy to follow. If/when this passage is read out today, we might not expect most people to 'get it'. But the prophet says some very important things. He reminds people that they are not responsible for the sins of their forebears, only for their own (we may recall what Jesus was asked about a blind man – see John 9.1-3). And he uses the phrase 'House of Israel' to refer to a whole community of people called to repent, not just individuals – do we tend to understand repentance as only an individual response?

New Testament: Philippians 2.1-13

<i>(New Revised Standard Version)</i>	<i>(The Message)</i>	<i>(Contemporary English Version)</i>
<p>¹If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ¹²Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.</p>	<p>¹⁻⁴ If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you <i>care</i>—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.</p> <p>⁵⁻⁸ Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became <i>human</i>! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.</p> <p>⁹⁻¹¹ Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.</p> <p>¹²⁻¹³ What I'm getting at, friends, is that you should simply keep on doing what you've done from the beginning. When I was living among you, you lived in responsive obedience. Now that I'm separated from you, keep it up. Better yet, redouble your efforts. Be energetic in your life of</p>	<p>Christ encourages you, and his love comforts you. God's Spirit unites you, and you are concerned for others. ² Now make me completely happy! Live in harmony by showing love for each other. Be united in what you think, as if you were only one person. ³ Don't be jealous or proud, but be humble and consider others more important than yourselves. ⁴ Care about them as much as you care about yourselves ⁵ and think the same way that Christ Jesus thought:^[a]</p> <p>⁶ Christ was truly God. But he did not try to remain equal with God. Instead he gave up everything and became a slave, when he became like one of us. Christ was humble. He obeyed God and even died on a cross. Then God gave Christ the highest place and honoured his name above all others. So at the name of Jesus everyone will bow down, those in heaven, on earth, and under the earth. And to the glory of God the Father everyone will openly agree, "Jesus Christ is Lord!"</p> <p>¹² My dear friends, you always obeyed when I was with you. Now that I am away, you should obey even more. So work with fear and trembling to discover what it really means to be saved. ¹³ God is working in you to make you willing and able to obey him.</p>

	salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is <i>God's</i> energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure.	
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Bible notes

New Testament: Philippians 2.1-13

Continuing on from where we ended last week, Paul encourages the Philippians using what seems to be an early Christian poem or hymn (vv.6-11). It has two stanzas. The first is about humility, the second about exaltation. And it clearly and unequivocally identifies Jesus with God. He was 'in the form of God' (v.6) but also distinct from God who 'highly exalted' him (v.9). 'Jesus Christ is Lord, to the Glory of God the Father' (v.11).

Paul explains that living faith like it matters means being willing to be completely humiliated, stripping off your former identity and being cast down to the lowest social class (which in this context is slavery). Status was everything in the Roman world, but Paul says that it counts for nothing with God. And he ends not with a call to repentance, but with a call to humbly 'work out your own salvation'. Here, 'your own' is plural – Paul is writing to the church in Philippi. It has an individual aspect to it, of course, but it is about a community working out their salvation with each person playing their individual part in that collective story. If Paul's letters are about the church as a community, why are we often reluctant to engage with them in this way, preferring to use them to signal only personal morality issues? But remember too that in respect of each of Paul's letters we know only part of the story, as we never hear from those to whom he wrote – and even some of Paul's side of the story is missing.

Gospel: Matthew 21.23-32

<i>(New Revised Standard Version)</i>	<i>(The Message)</i>	<i>(Contemporary English Version)</i>
<p>²³ When 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?' ²⁴ Jesus 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. ²⁵ Did 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?"' ²⁶ But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' ²⁷ So 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. 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^[a] 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.</p>	<p>²³ Then he was back in the Temple, teaching. The high priests and leaders of the people came up and demanded, "Show us your credentials. Who authorized you to teach here?" ²⁴⁻²⁵ Jesus responded, "First let me ask you a question. You answer my question and I'll answer yours. About the baptism of John—who authorized it: heaven or humans?" ²⁵⁻²⁷ They were on the spot and knew it. They pulled back into a huddle and whispered, "If we say 'heaven,' he'll ask us why we didn't believe him; if we say 'humans,' we're up against it with the people because they all hold John up as a prophet." They decided to concede that round to Jesus. "We don't know," they answered. Jesus said, "Then neither will I answer your question. ²⁸ "Tell me what you think of this story: A man had two sons. He went up to the first and said, 'Son, go out for the day and work in the vineyard.' ²⁹ "The son answered, 'I don't want to.' Later on he thought better of it and went. ³⁰ "The father gave the same command to the second son. He answered, 'Sure, glad to.' But he never went. ³¹⁻³² "Which of the two sons did what the father asked?" They said, "The first." Jesus said, "Yes, and I tell you that crooks and whores are going to precede you into God's kingdom. John came to you showing you the right road. You turned up your noses at him, but the crooks and whores believed him. Even when you saw their changed lives, you didn't care enough to change and believe him.</p>	<p>²³ Jesus had gone into the temple and was teaching when the chief priests and the leaders of the people came up to him. They asked, "What right do you have to do these things? Who gave you this authority?" Jesus answered, "I have just one question to ask you. If you answer it, I will tell you where I got the right to do these things. ²⁵ Who gave John the right to baptize? Was it God in heaven or merely some human being?" They thought it over and said to each other, "We can't say that God gave John this right. Jesus will ask us why we didn't believe John. ²⁶ On the other hand, these people think that John was a prophet, and we are afraid of what they might do to us. That's why we can't say that it was merely some human who gave John the right to baptize." ²⁷ So they told Jesus, "We don't know." Jesus said, "Then I won't tell you who gave me the right to do what I do." ²⁸ Jesus said: I will tell you a story about a man who had two sons. Then you can tell me what you think. The father went to the older son and said, "Go work in the vineyard today!" ²⁹ His son told him that he would not do it, but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ The man then told his younger son to go work in the vineyard. The boy said he would, but he didn't go. ³¹ Which one of the sons obeyed his father?" "The older one," the chief priests and leaders answered. Then Jesus told them: You can be sure that tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you ever will! ³² When John the Baptist showed you how to do right, you would not believe him. But these evil people did believe.</p>

		And even when you saw what they did, you still would not change your minds and believe.
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Bible notes

Gospel: Matthew 21.23-32

Jesus tells the parable of the two sons in the Temple in front of the religious elite. It is like someone going into Westminster Abbey, or Methodist Central Hall, also in Westminster, and confronting the leadership. We might wonder what sort of reception they would get! The religious leaders ask Jesus questions to justify their position. Jesus responds with questions of his own. He then asks, 'Which son?' The son who goes on to do what the father asked, or the other one? And he recalls the ministry of John the Baptist and how ordinary people responded to that. To compare the Pharisees to tax collectors and prostitutes would have been a mighty insult to a group who put great store in carrying out every aspect of the Law of Moses. But that is not the test of rightness or righteousness – we do the 'right thing' when we repent and live according to kingdom values. And this matters much more than defending our social position and status.

The links between the lectionary readings

Living right with God means making many – and often great – changes in our lives in order to adopt God's values. This is what repentance is. You might say it is a type of 'rehab'. In these three readings, to three different communities, we get three different illustrations – a prophecy, a hymn and a parable – illustrations of what this new way of life looks like. It is a big thing to embark upon and a lifelong project both communally and individually.

Picture Pointers:

'Where do you see yourself in this image?'



- Where do you see yourself in this image?
- When do you find joy in helping others?
- If the keyhole in this image represents 'key support' what does that look like in your church community?

Prayers of intercession

So often we want to pray for others.
But sometimes, God, we don't know how.
We can't remember names or numbers;
other issues weigh heavily on our hearts.
Thank goodness, God,
that you know what we mean when we pray.
So, we bring in this moment
those names and faces, images and desires for others
that pop in and out of our minds throughout the day:
the old lady at the bus stop who needed a hand up the step;
the young mum at the checkout trying to contain her four kids;
the chap up the road who's lost his dog and is calling for him;
the teachers struggling to understand the needs of those in their class;
the doctors who wants to give us more time but who simply can't;
the young families who can't make ends meet;
those without work, who can't find new jobs;
those helping people to find work, knowing it is an uphill struggle;
those with mental health issues and seeking help,
or who are afraid and ashamed to seek help,
or who are ignored and can't get help.
So, God, for all these people and countless others,
we offer our prayers.
We know you do not need reminding,
but you do need willing workers – even us –
to help them know your love and have their needs met.
Hear our ramblings, O God. **Amen.**

A personal prayer

May we go, Lord God,
to meet the needs of others
and share the love we have from you. **Amen.**

Live your faith

Think of someone you don't normally engage with – and do something specific and positive to help meet the needs of that person.