

Time and again Paul is inspired by a messy problem to gain a fresh insight. In one memorable instance, he is forced to defend himself for not having visited the Christian community at Corinth as promised. He was accused of saying "Yes, yes" and "No, no" at the same time. His rather indignant response leads him on to declare: "... the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you ... was not 'Yes and No'; but in him it is always 'Yes.' For in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes.'"

How simple but profound to say that Jesus is "Yes"! He is both God's "Yes" to humanity, and humanity's "Yes" to God. Jesus is the definitive divine-human "Yes".

This word of a single syllable is immensely rich in meaning. We see this in the wonderful early Christian hymn cited by Paul in his letter to the Philippians. He wants them to be a "Yes" like Christ: "In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus".

Both Ezekiel and Jesus assure us that even when our first word is "No", God has the last word, and it is "Yes".

A reading from the prophet Ezekiel

18:25-28

The word of the Lord was addressed to me as follows: 'You object, "What the Lord does is unjust." Listen, you House of Israel: is what I do unjust? Is it not what you do that is unjust? When the upright man renounces his integrity to commit sin and dies because of this, he dies because of the evil that he himself has committed. When the sinner renounces sin to become law-abiding and honest, he deserves to live. He has chosen to renounce all his previous sins; he shall certainly live; he shall not die.'

First Reading

The whole of chapter 18 in the book of the prophet Ezekiel is devoted to the issue of individual responsibility. In God's name he teaches that each person will live or die in accordance with their own actions.

The chapter develops into a rhetorical argument between Ezekiel and the "House of Israel". The prophet formulates his hearers' objections then replies to them. By the time we get to the passage to be read today Ezekiel is in full flight. That means that we are plunged without warning into the thick of the debate. This difficulty is not really eased by the brief introduction because it creates an awkward transition.

The reading as a whole is prefaced by the first verse of the chapter: "The word of the Lord was addressed to me as follows". Then it leaps ahead to verse 25 at which point Ezekiel addresses his hostile audience. This change of focus is abrupt. Readers will need to pause for a moment after the introductory statement before proceeding.

The body of text commences with one of the objections raised by the people: "What the Lord does is unjust". It isn't clear on what grounds this objection is made, even in the context of the whole chapter.

On the other hand a close reading of the text will show that Ezekiel's teaching is clear. Those who abandon honest living to commit sin will die, while sinners who repent will live. Readers will need to look carefully at how Ezekiel presents his case to be able to communicate it plainly to the congregation.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 24:4-9

R. Remember your mercies, O Lord.

Lord, make me know your ways.
Lord, teach me your paths.
Make me walk in your truth, and teach me:
for you are God my saviour. R.

Remember your mercy, Lord,
and the love you have shown from of old.
Do not remember the sins of my youth.
In your love remember me,
because of your goodness, O Lord. R.

The Lord is good and upright.
He shows the path to those who stray,
he guides the humble in the right path;
he teaches his way to the poor. R.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 24/25 is a prayer to God from an individual who is struggling with a difficult situation. The psalmist prays for guidance and help, as well as forgiveness for past failures.

The response is derived from the body of the psalm. It grounds the plea for present help in the memory of past mercy.

It is in the second verse that the connection with the first reading is most explicit. The psalmist admits past failures - "the sins of my youth" - but at the same time acknowledges the experience of on-going mercy - "the love you have shown from of old". The first two verses are in the form of petition, while the third verse is a declaration of faith.

Readers will need to adjust their proclamation of the second verse to allow for the fact that it is in five lines rather than four.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Philippians

2:1-11

If our life in Christ means anything to you, if love can persuade at all, or the Spirit that we have in common, or any tenderness and sympathy, then be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind. That is the one thing which would make me completely happy. There must be no competition among you, no conceit; but everybody is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of his own interests first but everybody thinks of other people's interests instead. In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus:

[His state was divine,
yet he did not cling
to his equality with God
but emptied himself
to assume the condition of a slave,
and became as men are;
and being as all men are,
he was humbler yet,
even to accepting death,
death on a cross.
But God raised him high
and gave him the name
which is above all other names
so that all beings
in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld,
should bend the knee at the name of Jesus
and that every tongue should acclaim
Jesus Christ as Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.]

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

21:28-32

Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people, 'What is your opinion? A man had two sons. He went and said to the first, "My boy, you go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not go", but afterwards thought better of it and went. The man then went and said the same thing to the second who answered, "Certainly, sir", but did not go. Which of the two did the father's will?' 'The first' they said. Jesus said to them, 'I tell you solemnly, tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you, a pattern of true righteousness, but you did not believe him, and yet the tax collectors and prostitutes did. Even after seeing that, you refused to think better of it and believe in him.'

Second Reading

The letter to the Philippians is distinguished by its affectionate and joyful spirit. Nonetheless there are issues to be faced. It seems that there is some disunity in the community, perhaps an interpersonal disagreement (see Paul's reference to Euodia and Syntyche in 4:2).

The reading begins with Paul's heartfelt appeal for unity. In four successive emotionally charged phrases he launches his campaign for unity. This is Paul at his persuasive best. His powerful urging is cast in wholly positive terms. The appeal he makes should be proclaimed with great strength of conviction.

He goes on to spell out what unity demands: "no competition, no conceit ... be self-effacing ... think of other people's interests ...". These moral exhortations culminate in Paul's advice to the community: "In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus".

This inspires Paul to cite the splendid hymn that follows. It is a rich text that has been mined ever since for what it teaches about the nature and mission of Jesus Christ. We heard it earlier in the year on Palm (Passion) Sunday. Because every phrase is laden with meaning it needs to be proclaimed slowly, deliberately and with great conviction.

Readers will note that the NRSV offers the text in inclusive language.

Gospel

In between last Sunday's parable and this, much has happened in Matthew's gospel. Jesus has made his mock triumphal entry into Jerusalem and has cleansed the temple; he has also taught and healed and engaged in the prophetic act of cursing the fig tree. This section of the gospel (20:17 - 21:27) is worth reading through because it provides important context for today's parable.

The entire gospel drama is coming to a climax. The last days of Jesus' life are under way. His final confrontation with the forces gathering against him is about to occur. A preliminary skirmish between Jesus and the Jewish authorities is now taking place in the temple. They challenge his authority in vain. This prompts Jesus to respond with a series of parables which we hear over three Sundays, starting today.

As Matthew presents them, Jesus uses these parables to accuse Israel's leaders of wilful refusal to accept him or the Baptist before him. But by recording them in his gospel Matthew is alerting later generations of religious leaders to the perennial danger of resistance to God's call. The risk extends to church communities in general and to their individual members. The categorical judgement that Jesus passes - "Even after seeing that, you refused to think better of it and believe in him" - makes sense in the context of Jesus' own impending condemnation.