

Exodus 16: 2-15
Psalm 105: 1-6, 37-45
Philippians 1: 21-30
St. Matthew 20: 1-16

Pentecost 17 2023.

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Philippians 1: 27

I have heard some people describe the Bible as a “manual for life” – that is, a guide about how to live... However, I think that phrase needs to be used carefully. Taken as a whole, the Bible indeed reveals God’s purposes, and gives us guidance about how to live...

It is certainly true that there are many wonderful examples of lives of faith in the Bible: We can look to the humility and faith of Mary, the blessed Mother of our Lord, who in learning of the incarnation in her womb, prayed, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word.” We can look at the determined missionary activity and teaching by the apostle St. Paul. We can look at the faith of David, even in the midst of so many adversities. We can look to the bold witness of St. Peter, inspired by God’s Spirit – and so on... There are many positive examples about how to live, to be found in the Bible...

Of course, our *perfect* example of how to live is the life and ministry of Jesus Christ himself. The writer St. Luke is particularly clear about this: If we want to follow God well, the saints throughout history can be great examples... However, the *perfect* example of how to live is the Lord Jesus Christ himself. We are called to love like Christ, to pray like Christ, to stand against injustice like Christ, to be tender-hearted like Christ; to be prepared to surrender ourselves even to our crosses like Christ, to live anew like Christ; and so on... If we want to know how to love God and to love one another as ourselves, we need to be soaked with the priorities of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; and to live his way...

So, there are *positive* examples in the Bible – supremely, the example of Jesus Christ himself... However, we also need to acknowledge that there are negative examples in the Bible: That is, there are many illustrations in the Bible stories of how *not* to live, and what it looks like to disobey God...

The readings today provide us with 3 different examples of how *not* to live. That is, how *not* to live God’s way...

The first example of what not to do can be found in today’s gospel passage, from Matthew 20: The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard. It’s a well-known story, isn’t it? In this parable, as was the custom of the time, the owner of the vineyard went to the town square or some public place like that, to hire workers for the day. The owner of the vineyard hires more workers in early morning, mid-morning, lunchtime and mid-afternoon. He even hires workers in late afternoon.

At the end of the day, the vineyard owner pays the workers who started about 3 or 4pm a full days' wage: a denarius. This wage is comparable to paying the workers who worked a couple of hours the equivalent of minimum wage for eight hours' work!... The workers who started about 6am thought that they would be paid even more; they are resentful that they get paid exactly the same amount...

Now, as the old Anglican Sunday School curriculum said, a parable is “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” This isn't really a story about ancient labour practices, is it? The owner of the vineyard is God himself, the owner of all things. The reward at the end of the day is our heavenly reward... Those of us who have served the Lord God from the beginning of our days will receive our just reward, just like those who had a sudden late-in-life conversion experience, and *then* begin doing the Lord's work. We need not be resentful because someone had a late-in-life conversion to God's way and work. Rather, our appropriate response is to be gratitude, that they too get to share in the heavenly rewards...

In this parable, the target is the resentful workers, who worked in the sun all day. In its application, we might say that we are in danger of being the resentful workers. If we've served God for as long as we can remember, let's beware that we don't assume that we are more deserving of our heavenly rewards than the party girl or the worldly guy who on their deathbed, may surrender it all and be baptized... We need to recall that absolutely none of us deserve the gift of eternal life; eternal life is an amazing free gift by our awesome God...

So in the gospel passage for today, the negative example is those who serve God dutifully, but never in quite the right spirit. Not loving, but resentful under the surface, with the foolish and mistaken assumption that we deserve heaven as a reward, because we think we are more “nice” than somebody new to some local church...

In contrast, we are invited to delight in the wonder that God's mercy is so broad, that it includes even sinners like us. God's grace is even sufficient to break through the most self-centred of lives, every hour, every day...

Next, today's second reading, from Philippians 1, affirms the priority of living beautifully for God. Paul words it this way: “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ (v. 27).” The instruction to the congregation is clear – we are to live our lives in ways which are worthy of the gospel we've received...

It's clear that Paul is proud of the Philippians – but they aren't perfect! He continues,

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are

standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents...

“And are in no way intimidated by your opponents...” What does this tell us about the Philippian congregation? They *were* intimidated by their opponents. Philippians was a Roman colony; the cultural tide was against the followers of Jesus Christ... The Philippians were intimidated or afraid of the world around them. They had forgotten the message which God gave time and again, “Do not be afraid...”

If the negative example in Matthew is resentment to some new members *within* God’s Church, the negative example in this Philippians passage is fear of some others *outside* the Church...

Let’s recall the words near the beginning of Second Timothy: “For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline (1: 7).” We are not to carry a spirit of cowardice...

I John 4: 18: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.” “Perfect love casts out fear...”

The third and final negative example – how *not* to behave – can be found in today’s first reading, from Exodus 16. We’ll recall that God has just done an amazing miracle, delivering the people of God from the Egyptian army by parting the Red Sea. However, God’s people are now in the hot, dry desert of the Arabian peninsula. The sun is burning hot by day. The nights are surprisingly chilly. Water is scarce, and sometimes the water is unfit to drink. Food is hard to come by. The Promised Land isn’t anywhere in sight, and God’s people end up wandering around for 40 years. *Forty years!*...

The people of Israel begin by engaging in selective memories... They are forgetting the experience of slavery, and the cruelty of the Egyptian guards. What they *do* remember is that food was available. What then? They begin to mutter under their breath against the congregational leaders, Moses and his brother Aaron...

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’ (16: 2-3)

The congregation is blaming Moses and Aaron because of the desert topography!...

Sometimes there can be disagreements among people of faith. God hasn't made us all the same, so occasional disagreements among people of faith is to be expected... However, there are healthy and unhealthy ways of dealing with conflict in a congregation... Grumpiness, and muttering under our breaths about the leaders – surely it was unfair to blame Moses and Aaron that they were in a desert environment! – are examples of *unhealthy* conflict... In contrast, if we have concerns, we need to speak about them openly, being willing to listen to other perspectives; and always motivated by Christian love...

We note that God provided for the people, even in the wilderness! They received manna, the flake-like bread-like substance which was in abundance around them. On other occasions, they were able to catch quails. God in fact was providing for them all along – they simply didn't have eyes to see... We might ask ourselves, Am I really in want and deprivation? Or is God really providing for my needs, and I am not appreciating how God is at work in my life and around me, all along?...

Sometimes the Bible contains negative examples – that is, examples of what *not* to do... In contrast, we are invited to rejoice in all members of God's Church, whoever and whenever they join us... We are not to be fearful of the world around us, but to share God's love and life revealed by Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit... Lastly, within the congregation, we are not to murmur, but to address concerns we have openly, graciously, and in love...

As we are encouraged in the second reading, May our “manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Alleluia! Amen.