

## The 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14**

The scriptures for the 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time deal in their own unique ways with a common theme of obedience to God in the midst of personal and public life. Each passage calls upon both individuals and the community to make a decision to follow Yahweh or to follow the standards and priorities of a society that is oppressive, exploitive and dominating. And each scripture clearly demonstrates that “many are called, but few are chosen” (Mt. 22:14).

**Exodus 32:1-14.** Last Sunday’s Old Testament lesson, Exodus 20:1-20, dealt with what God and Moses intended to have happen with the children of Israel at Mount Sinai. But it didn’t happen that way (in a second attempt later on, it finally did – see Exodus 34:1-35). What actually happened when Moses descended Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments is told in today’s Old Testament lesson – Exodus 32:1-14. And what actually happened was a far cry from what God had intended to happen!

The Israelites were at Mount Sinai, and Moses had gone up the mountain to meet with God. “When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, ‘Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ . . . (Aaron) took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (Ex. 32:1, 4).

It is intriguing to note that Israel’s rebellion begins as a rebellion against Moses (vss. 1, 5), not ostensibly a rebellion against God. Moses is the handy target of Israel’s frustration, anger and impatience. But it becomes clear as the rebellion continues that the true target of Israel’s rage is God (vss. 4, 6, 8). And the indication that their rebellion is indeed against God was their desire to build a golden calf and to worship it.

The calf was most likely a symbol of Apis, the Egyptian fertility bull-god. As a calf, Apis symbolized strength, leadership and fertility to the Egyptians. Embracing the Egyptian fertility bull-calf Apis, therefore, was not only a rebellion against Moses’ authority, but also against the leadership, divine intervention and liberating action of Yahweh (note that the first King Jeroboam did the same thing in I Kings 12:25-30). Thus embracing the golden calf was idolatry.

But it was more than that. By choosing to worship Apis as a calf, the Israelites were rejecting the covenant with Yahweh that named them as God’s “chosen people”. Yahweh had chosen them. But they had decided to choose Apis! Freed from captivity and inhumane slavery to Egypt, the Israelites were now choosing Egypt for their lord! By embracing Apis, they were re-embracing the life-style, the standards and the priorities of Egypt.

In essence, the struggle Israel faced that was so clearly manifested in their worship of Apis instead of Yahweh was that of trust. Would they place their trust and their destiny as a people in “He who causes to be what is caused to be” or in the lesser gods of Egypt? This struggle that struck at the very heart of Israel had been going on since the very beginning of Moses’ efforts to

deliver Israel from bondage. The people grumbled about the results of Moses' confrontation of Pharaoh while they were still captives in Egypt (Exod. 5:1-23); they panicked at the Reed Sea, unable to envision God delivering them (14:10-14). They complained bitterly in the wilderness about not having sufficient food and longing to return to "the fleshpots" of Egypt where they "ate our fill of bread" (16:1-4). They even placed God on trial for not giving them an adequate water supply, until God provided for them an abundance of water (17:1-7). But now their dissatisfaction reached its apex when they complained because Moses had been too long on the mountain, and they decided to substitute an Egyptian god for Yahweh (32:1-6).

What was the significance of the people's action to create a golden Egyptian calf-god and both worship it and hold a great feast of debauchery and gluttony before it? (Because Apis was a fertility god, the way people worshipped him in Egypt was through mass sexual debauchery.) It was not solely that they were choosing one god over another. It was that – having been liberated from Egypt's political and economic control – the Israelites were voluntarily returning to Egypt once again! They had been rescued and released from Egyptian slavery. But they were bringing with them out into the desert and – if it were not stopped – would bring with them into the Promised Land the religion of another god, the Egyptian politics of oppression and the Egyptian economics of greed and exploitation.

What Moses realized that day as he stood with the two tablets of the Ten Commandments before his people caught up in the worship and orgy of an Egyptian god, was that he could take Israel out of Egypt but that it was far harder to take Egypt out of the Israelites! That is, God could organize through Moses to force the Pharaoh to release the Israelites; the results of not releasing them only had to become too painful a price for Egypt to pay! But it was quite another thing to take Egypt out of the Israelites. That is, after 500 years of being in captivity, the Israelites had undergone a profound change in character. They had changed from people who embraced life to people who had become beaten down, dominated and conceding to their slavery.

The Hebrews had learned to become dependent upon Egyptian domination. They only had to follow orders to keep out of trouble. They had been told repeatedly what worthless, stupid and lazy people they were and how unable they were to cope with life. And they had come to believe and even embrace these lies they had been told by their captors. Their oppressors had not only oppressed their bodies, but their souls as well. Those who exploited them not only took advantage of their capacity for physical labor, but took control of their minds and spirits. They even moved them from worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to worshipping Egyptian gods like Apis – so that they even forgot their heritage. They were spiritually, emotionally and mentally enslaved every bit as much as they were physically enslaved. And Moses – and even God – could free them from their physical enslavement, but as long as they lived in fear, helplessness and victimization, there would be no way that they could be spiritually freed!

What was to be done with Israel? "The Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation' (vss. 9-10). Moses then argues against this course of action on the grounds that it will invalidate to Egypt and the world what God had done in defeating the Egyptian gods and in bringing Israel out of slavery and that such action

would be unfaithful to God's promises to Abraham, Isaac and "Israel" (note that he doesn't use the word "Jacob"). "And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" (vs. 14). Thus, Israel was saved from total destruction.

But although the Israelites were saved from total destruction, they were not saved from punishment. Moses, enraged, threw the two tablets to the ground, thus destroying the Ten Commandments (they would later be replaced and presented to a sobered people – 34:1-35). He then broke up the golden calf, ground it into gold dust and made the people drink it. Then, he sent his lieutenants out among the people to root out those who had been behind this conspiracy, and they were then executed.

But such punishment didn't root out the problem; it only contained rebellion to a later day. For the problem lay in the people themselves – a people so emotionally, intellectually and spiritually enslaved by their 500 years of forced labor that they simply could not envision themselves in any other way than "making do" in a suppressed environment. The present generation of physically-liberated but spiritually-oppressed Hebrew slaves had to die off before a new generation of truly free people could emerge. It had to be a new generation – bred and born and raised and hardened in the desert – which would have the convictions, capacity and commitments to become an Israel strong and decisive enough to enter the Promised Land and to build a nation there. Thus, Moses had to come to a hard decision – a decision that God had already recognized in God's harsh but accurate recognition that a whole generation had to die off before Israel would be able to enter its Promised Land.

Thus, Israel remained in the wilderness for an entire generation. But that sojourn in the wilderness was not wasted time. During that time, a nation was built out of a swarm of released slaves. A covenant was made between the people and Yahweh, just as a covenant had been made by God with Abraham. The object of this covenant, contained in their Law, was to return humanity to be at one with God and one another, to orient their political life in justice for peasant as well as prince, and to share their wealth so that no one was forced to live in poverty. In the desert, Israel's laws were formulated, its political and economic life formed, its religious institutions created, its people taught to fight as a militia. It was in the wilderness that Israel built its "Shalom Community", a community that could only be built if God were to be, in God's actions, "he who causes to be what is caused to be", and humans would live responsibly!

### **Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23**

This psalm deals with the reality and results of disobedience by the people of God. It reflects on Israel's sin in the face of godly care of it throughout its history. Thus, the psalm sets the norm by declaring, "Happy are those who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times" (106:5). It is such action that truly "gives thanks to the Lord, for he is good" (vs. 1b).

But the norm of obedience and observation of justice is a far cry from what Israel actually did. "Both we and our ancestors have sinned; we have committed iniquity, have done wickedly" (vs. 6). And how have they done wickedly?

The Psalmist then goes on to state Israel's iniquity through a recitation of Israel's sins, beginning with their doubt at the exodus and at the Red Sea (vss. 7-12), jealousy and rebelliousness in the wilderness (vv. 13-18), the incident of the worship of the golden calf (vss. 19-23), their perpetual grumbling (vss. 24-27), their worship of the Baal of Peor (vss. 28-31), Moses' sin at the waters of Meribah (vss. 32-33), and their idolatry of other gods once they entered into the Promised Land – especially adopting the lifestyle of the heathen Canaanites (vss. 34-46).

Thus, in commenting upon this Sunday's examination of the incident that happened at Mount Sinai, the psalmist wrote, "They made a calf at Horeb and worshiped a cast image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. Therefore, he had said he would destroy them – had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them" (vss. 19-23). In this passage, the psalmist had cut right to the chase, stating that their real sin in the worship of this golden calf had been that "they forgot God, their Savior". And by doing so, they had substituted "the glory of God for the image of an ox"!

In the light of such continual doubting and disobedience, the psalmist can only pray, "Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. And let all the people say, "Amen". Praise the Lord" (vss. 47-48)!

**Matthew 22:1-14** is a parable told by Jesus. It tells a story of a king who invites selected guests to a royal banquet that they spurn. That king punishes those offenders, but then also sends his servants out into the streets to gather all whom they found, both good and bad". These come to the banquet, but one guest, inappropriately dressed, is "thrown out into the outer darkness". The lesson of the parable, Jesus states, is that "many are called, but few are chosen" (vs. 14).

To understand this parable, one must set it in its context. The primary purpose of the Gospel of Matthew was to demonstrate that Jesus is truly the Messiah, but that he is the marginalized Messiah. That marginalization is expressed in the stories that surround Matthew 22:1-14. This parable is preceded by three parables – the parable of the son who agreed to serve but didn't and the son who refused to serve but did (21:28-32) and the parable of the wicked tenants who slew the heir to the vineyard for which they were to be responsible (21:33-46). The third parable was acted-out: the story of the cursing of the fig tree (21:12-27). All three parables have as their focus the heirs of the kingdom of Israel (that is, the priests, pharisees and Sadducees), who have rejected the very premises of that kingdom that were set down by Moses. They have ostensibly worshipped Yahweh, but actually have been worshipping the priorities and standards of the new "Apis" – Rome.

The stories that immediately follow Matthew 22:1-14 – all of which deal with Jesus' defense against the attacks of the Jewish leaders – symbolize the reality that those who follow Jesus as well as Jesus himself are going to be forever up against the political, economic and religious forces of society that see themselves as "called" but are not "chosen"!

This is a second allegorical parable. But this parable is told about a king and his banquet. The king, of course, is God, the son who is about to be married is Jesus, the wedding banquet is the celebration of the covenant made through Christ between God and God's people ("the chosen", who, in this parable, are poor). And the slaves who go out into the city's streets with the invitation to the banquet are the Israelite prophets of yore.

As stated above, the king plans a banquet that is spurned by the guests. So he sends his slaves out into the streets to gather in the ordinary folk – both good and bad – to attend the banquet. To us 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, this parable seems to be about rudeness. But it is much more than that. To understand that "much more", however, we must understand the protocols of a royal banquet held in the Mediterranean world at the time of Jesus.

To understand the dynamics of the story Jesus was telling, one must recognize that Israel, at the time of Christ, was an "honor-shame" society. This was a society that was built upon both the placing of honor and the placing of shame. The longing for honor and the fear of shame was the driving force in the operation of that society. Israelites did not measure each other by their wealth or their political position; they were measured by whether the way they lived their lives brought honor or shame to their extended family, village, profession or social class. Thus, a Zacchaeus could be enormously wealthy (which would get him high status in our society), but how he gained that wealth as a tax collector shamed him before Israel and made him an outcast. Likewise, a priest like Zechariah who might be very poor would be honored with service at the altar in the Jerusalem Temple, simply because he had been a faithful priest all of his life. Understanding that Israel was an "honor-shame" society throws Jesus' parable of the royal banquet into new relief.

A royal banquet was, as one could expect, the peak of social activity. To receive an invitation to a royal banquet was a command performance. To not attend was to fall into severe disfavor with the king that might threaten your position in society and even court death (which is what happened in 22:7, what would have been considered by the parable's hearers as a just response). Such an invitation would signal who was "in" and who was "out" in that society.

The listeners to Jesus that day must have been stunned when he said, "The king sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. They made light of (the invitation) and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them" (vss. 3, 5-6). This was outrageous conduct! Were these intended guests mad? The listeners probably didn't feel any resolution at such insulting and shameful behavior until Jesus said, "the king was enraged; he sent his troops, destroyed those murderers and burned their city" (vs. 7). Indeed! That was the only proper response of a king so thoroughly insulted.

In essence, what those guests had done by refusing to make a command appearance at the king's banquet was to not only disrespect the king, but to reject his authority over them. It was an act of outright rebellion against the king that could be satisfied only by their deaths. It was simply the most outrageous and unbelievable conduct!

But then the king does something utterly amazing! He still wants to hold a wedding banquet for his son. So he commands his servants to go “out into the streets (of the city) and gather all whom they find, both good and bad”. The servants did so, and “the wedding hall was filled with guests” (vs. 10). Rather than inviting the elite, the powerful and those of high position to his son’s wedding banquet, the king has invited those who were shamed in that society – the poor, the powerless, the peasants, the shepherds, the beggars, the prostitutes of that society. Having been shamed himself, the king now joins to himself the shamed of his society in order to celebrate the wedding of his son!

But the story doesn’t end there. The king enters his filled banquet hall, only to find one of the guests still dressed in his tatters and without a wedding robe. It would have been customary at such a banquet for the host to supply identical wedding robes to each person, so this man had obviously not bothered to pick up a robe distributed to everyone else. Thus, the king is once again disrespected and his authority rejected – but this time by a poor person. So, the parable concludes, “the king said to the attendant, ‘Bind him hand and foot; and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’” (vs. 13).

The moral of the parable? “Many are called, but few are chosen” (vs. 14) – even among the poor! What Jesus was clearly saying through this allegorical parable was that God celebrates with his Son, Jesus, the covenant (“the marriage contract”) that God has made through Christ with God’s people (“the chosen”). But those who seem to be God’s people often aren’t. The Jewish leadership has rejected their places at God’s banquet table, Jesus is saying in this parable. Instead, they are being replaced by the poor, the marginalized, the ordinary people of Israel – but even some of them prove to be as closed to God’s intervention through Jesus as are Israel’s leadership!

Often, those who are powerful, who hold high position in society, who have great wealth, who hold political office talk a great deal about God, justice and compassion; but they will disrespect and reject God’s authority over both their public and private lives, and will not seek to use their wealth or power for the advancement of God’s kingdom. Likewise, many who are poor, powerless and marginalized, although often appearing very spiritual, may be as self-serving and as infected with greed and a lust for power as may be their far wealthier “brothers and sisters”. They, too, will appear “called”, but they are not chosen. It is both in the midst of daily life as well as in the royal banquet that the incursion of God’s kingdom into society will expose a person for what he truly is – one who is committed to the building of God’s kingdom, the shalom community of justice, economic equity and relationship with God, or one who is committed to himself and his own priorities.

The true hero of this story is the king. Consider what the king did that day. Initially he sought, as he had always done, to draw into the society that he intended for humanity those who provided religious, political and economic leadership of the nation. But they scorned him. So the king rejected (and eliminated) them. And instead, he extended hospitality, great honor and wealth (the wedding garments) to the poor, the marginalized and the powerless of his society. And in doing so, he had participated in the creation of a new social order in which the boundaries that normally separate the wealthy and powerful from the poor and marginalized were broken down around their common pain of being rejected and disrespected. Thus, the king establishes a

new community grounded in his gracious and uncalculating hospitality. And the least of these discover, to their delight, that they are among the chosen!

**Philippians 4:1-9** is the virtual conclusion of Paul's love letter to the Church in Philippi. In this portion, Paul shares three parting thoughts with his Philippians.

First, Paul tells them how important they are to him. They are "my joy and crown", for their faith and faithfulness to the gospel is a clear sign to Paul that his apostolic ministry has been a success! So he counsels them to continue to "stand firm in the Lord".

Second, Paul declares to them, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!" The life of the Christian may be hard at time, and we may receive criticism from our brothers and sisters in the faith, conflict with many and the attacks of the people and the systems of the political, economic and religious systems. We may feel often confronted by demonic forces. However, "rejoice in the Lord!" Never let anyone, any situation or any organization, group or structure take away from you your joy in the Lord.

Third, "whatever is true, whatever is honest, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you" (4:8-9).

What Paul is essentially doing here is calling the Philippians to obedience, to maintain "a long obedience in the same direction". Keep centered in the reality that you have been chosen by God, not because of who you are, but because of Whose you are! Be faithful to your calling. Keep on as did Moses when he saw his people lust after the standards of Egypt. Keep on as did the psalmist who grieved over the unwillingness of his people to be centered on obedience to God. Keep on as Jesus did when he saw both those who were powerful and many of the poor whom he loved turning their backs on the kingdom. Keep on as Paul did when faced with the certain expectation of his coming execution by Rome. Keep on keeping on, because it is in keeping on for the sake of Christ and His Kingdom to which God's chosen are called, that we find purpose for our lives!