

The Lectionary with Vicar

The appointed readings for this Sunday are taken from Exodus 19:2-8; Romans 5:6-15; Matthew 9:35-10:20. I encourage you to open your Bibles and read through these passages with me.

Exodus 19:2-8

Today we read about the covenant God made with Israel. This is the introductory paragraph, where God lays out the terms of the agreement. The people will obey His commands, and God will bless them and make them His special people. This is summed up in the two roles listed for Israel: a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

To understand this, we need to recognize the role of a priest. A priest is one who is charged with being the mediator between God and people. Priests had two basic tasks: sacrifices and teaching. For the sacrifices they did all the activities for worshipping God on behalf of the people. If the people did something wrong, the priests would offer sacrifices for them so that they could be reconciled once again to God. For teaching, they were responsible for making sure the people knew God's will, His Law, His grace, and all His mighty deeds. As a kingdom of priests, Israel did these things on behalf of all humanity. Through them could come the salvation of the world, as Jesus was offered up as a sacrifice on the cross, and through their scriptures they would allow the world to know more about God.

The other important concept is holiness. This just means "set apart." The best way of thinking of it is to think of a special set of china that only gets brought out and used for special occasions. So, when God calls His people a "holy nation," it means that they are His chosen people that He has designated for a special purpose. As we read this passage, we too can remember that by sending Christ, God has made us holy, too. We are set apart to be God's own special possession.

Romans 5:6-15

Paul writes to believe in Rome about two things: the reconciling work of Christ that occurred when we did not deserve it, and the parallel between Adam and Christ. In the first part, the reconciling blood of Christ is the main factor. By it, we who once were enemies of God are now at peace, and we will receive life since we are reconciled. This all happened "while we were still sinners." We did not do anything to deserve this reconciliation – it is a free gift of grace. Also note that this is not the usual metaphor for salvation – normally, we speak in terms of guilt and forgiveness, here Paul writes in terms of broken relationships and reconciliation. It is a good reminder of the breadth and depth of the Gospel message.

The parallel between Christ and Adam brings up another concept we are not as familiar with in our society and culture: collective guilt. One man sinned, and so all are guilty. At first glance this may not seem fair, but it is in line with all of scripture. Because of Adam's original sin, we are inclined towards sin, too. Because of this, we see throughout Scripture the whole community of Israel confessing their sins and the sins of their fathers. This doesn't remove individual responsibility for sin, but it does broaden our understanding of just how deadly sin is. But the good news is that, just as one man's sin makes us all guilty, so one man's sacrifice brings us all forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Matthew 9:35-10:20

Finally, in our Gospel reading, we read about Jesus sending out the 12 disciples. As in our Old Testament reading, we see that God's people are charged with revealing Him to the world. The prayer that people may go out to save others is answered by Christ sending us out – be careful what you pray for! Now it is no longer Israel who is sent out, but Israel is included in the ones to be saved. Now specifically the disciples of Christ are sent out to reveal God and His salvation to all people.

This requires no small amount of trust. Jesus tells His disciples and us that persecution will come as a result of going out. But He also promises that He will send the Holy Spirit, who will be with us as we proclaim His Word and will help us in our defense. Christ does not send His people out alone, but as specially chosen people set apart by the power of the Holy Spirit. In all that we do, we do it in the name and at the command of Christ, sure that He will give us the power to do all that is needed.

But the disciples are given more than just the command to go out. They are also given power. In the Gospel, they are given the power to perform the miracles of Christ, bringing healing and life to the people. They are also given the power to bless and to withhold blessing – to give peace and to take it back. Although this is not the usual text when we are talking about the office of the Keys, here we see clearly that Jesus gives to the church the power to forgive sins and the power to withhold forgiveness, all in the name and according to the will of God.

In all this, Jesus sends His disciples – and us today – out with the task of being priests. They are to bring salvation to the people of the world, and they are to reveal God to the rest of the world. This is our calling as well. And to do all this, Christ sets His followers apart – makes the Holy – with the power of the Holy Spirit.

A Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You have set us apart and tasked us with spreading Your word and forgiveness to all corners of the earth, grant that we may be strengthened by Your Holy Spirit to do the task You have prepared for us, that by it more and more may be saved each day. In Your name I pray. Amen.