

Who mows the lawn

Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-10; Matthew 18:15-20

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We have four readings today which are like 4 pieces of a pie. They cover the 'what' and the 'how' but not much of the 'why'. Jesus was very clear in his teachings that faith is a double-edged sword. If you believe, if you strongly believe, if you pick up the cross – you might be persecuted; it might be a very hard road; you are not protected and it may not end well on this earth... but your reward is on another plain altogether. You might call it heaven. You might see it in the joy we celebrate on earth. You might know it as ease with yourself and your God. The point is that Christ lived and died his life to know us and to show us what faith means.

Even the psalm talks of a double-edged sword. It is full of joy and praise. It illustrates a special relationship with God. Truly it shouts 'Hooray!'. Yet it concludes with a veiled threat that turns to vengeance. The threat is clear - the social order that God brings must reflect the moral integrity of the Divine...and if not, look out! We are given community but it is up to us to behave admirably.

The Exodus passage is almost like a 2nd Genesis. It is the birth of the Israelites. God shows that there is ONE great king who CAN be trusted and that God believes the oppressed must be freed¹. The good news is that the people were released but the bad news is that the instrument used to free them was death. But, on the upside, the people were not just liberated from Egypt but also from the plethora of Egyptian gods.

Those that escaped the shadow of death, the crowd that left for the desert, had little in common – they did not leave as a unified people but as pilgrims.

The above two readings tell us a little of the 'what' and Paul's letter to the Romans begins to tell us the 'how'. HOW do we come together? How do we change from pilgrims on their individual search to a body unified by Christ. "Historically, the church prioritises preparing souls for the afterlife but failed to form us into healthy human beings in this life".²

Paul's letter is one of the rare clues. It was written in the middle of the tension between those in the church that came from Jewish heritage and those from other backgrounds. This was an inclusive church but that does not mean there are no tensions – a lesson we are all too familiar with today. Paul is urging his readers to

¹ So I never could figure out how the Israelites and generations after that could ever justify slavery but they did.

² Cindy Lee, 2022, *De-westernising spiritual formation*, Fortress press, p4

trust in the fact that faith in Christ makes all the difference. It makes it possible to love your neighbour AND it should make it possible to love yourself, as God does.

Trust is as important in this reading as it is in the Exodus. The Israelites had to trust in God that they would not be slaughtered. They had to trust in God that they would be led to a better life. They had to trust each other enough to put their lives in each other's hands. We have to trust each other to accommodate differences and have difficult conversations with love. The joy of the Lord should, *should* be enough to let us be open with each other and ourselves. Only a healthy, whole person, one who is capable of loving themselves, is capable of loving another. We see this in failed relationships all the time. The bitterness one feels for oneself – taken out on the one we love.

Love of the other does not require self-depreciation or self-hatred. These emotions inhibit the ability to love others – including God. For some it is a hard concept that you are someone of value who happens to be with someone, not nothing without. If you fall down in worthless fear of your Lord, you are failing God. If you stand up as your best self, you are fulfilling the divine plan.

And finally, the Matthew reading elaborates on how we must be responsible for harmony. Remember this passage was written in a small community living in a hostile environment. They had enough enemies outside that would/could exploit divisions within. I chose *The Message* translation for our reading because it cannot be dismissed as an ancient catalogue of sins – or a textbook for battering congregants.

This reading is not a manual for identifying other people's sins, it is about identifying and dealing with how we put roadblocks up and won't be open and trusting of others. It's about all the times we say obstructive things like, 'talk to the hand' instead of actively engaging in discussion and problem-solving. We are supposed to be grown ups able to face difficulties and work them out. The passage recognises there will be differences of opinion and sometimes, bad behaviour and NOT dealing with it is the sin. The church is sadly, often sinful as we often don't deal with issues well.

Belonging to a community is a double-edged sword. We can love and uphold one another but it also makes us vulnerable to manipulation and to pain – even when it is not intended. We are called to be joyful in the Lord, gathered in His name AND we are called to act with the same integrity that called us together in the first place. When communities have the capacity to reconcile, Jesus will be there. If we do not, we are failing to serve Jesus. We are responsible for our own and each other's actions. Harmony does not mean papering over differences or avoiding discussion. But harmony does depend on trust.

That means trust in ourselves, each other and trust in the integrity God built into us.

Some of you will know the thing I loved about our new house is that it was surrounded by palm trees. Palms are a significant part of my childhood and I have a sense of 'home' when I watch them swaying. Each morning when I woke, I looked at the ocean through the palms and had a sense of comfort and wellbeing. Well, the palms were not on our property but rather the one across the street. When the new neighbours took possession, each and every one was chipped: every one. The day the tree removers went to work I was in tears. I felt sick in my stomach. It's an ache that goes back and touches my genesis – the very seeds from which this adult grew. I was heartbroken, literally and each time I looked out at the bare land across the street, my anger stirred.

Last week, I met my neighbour. She came across the street and introduced herself. After a little chit-chat, I asked her why they cut the palms down and her response was, 'I'm just not into palms.' That was it. So banal. We went on chatting for a while exchanging a little about the move and who and why we're here. It was sociable and informative but I had to break it off to go to a meeting.

While I was away, I thought about our conversation and I realised she was all alone in an empty house with no furniture (or fridge). Her husband and everything else would be arriving the next day. We are supposed to love our neighbour, right? How could I leave her alone in the house...so when I got home, instead of a casserole, I knocked on the door and invited her over for an Ozzie 'spag boll'³: Nothing fancy but some wine and cheese and company.

We had a delightful and revealing night. She talked about many vulnerabilities and aspirations. She told us she was nearly killed on the drive down that morning. (it was a seriously close call) We talked about careers and children and dreams and it turns out she comes from a whole family of ministers. We've both worked in science and the law. A true relationship is building and we will see her and her husband again soon.

It still hurts when I look out and don't see the trees. Life is a double-edged sword. I will feel the loss forever and I will probably gain a friend.

The one big thing these four readings tell us is that God will do the big stuff. The Lord will build the house but it is up to us to mow the lawn.

³ Spaghetti bolanaise