

Proper 21

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September 28, 2003

Prayer of the Day

God of love, you know our frailties and failings. Give us your grace to overcome them; keep us from those things that harm us; and guide us in the way of salvation; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

{4} The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! {5} We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; {6} but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."... {10} Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased. {11} So Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? {12} Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? {13} Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' {14} I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. {15} If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once--if I have found favor in your sight--and do not let me see my misery." {16} So the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you.... {24} So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. {25} Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again. {26} Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. {27} And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." {28} And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" {29} But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!"

After an extended block of legal material in Numbers 1-10:11 the Exodus narrative picks up in 10:11 on the twentieth day of the second month of the second year since the beginning of the exodus. The people are leaving Mt. Sinai where they had been since the first day of the third month of the first year (Exodus 19:1). The Ark of the Covenant has led them three days into the wilderness from Sinai (Exodus 10:33).

[1-3: The people complain about their misfortunes and Yahweh becomes angry with them. Some damage was done, Moses prayed for them, and Yahweh relented. The place was called "Taberah, because the fire of the Lord burned against them."]

4-6. *rabble...Israelites*: The word refers to the mixed group of people that accompanied the Israelites out of Egypt. See Exodus 12:38; Leviticus 24:10. The Israelites are also affected and add their complaints. Since the notion of a "people of Israel" is anachronistic the idea is of the mixed character of Israel as a whole.

a strong craving: The people complain that they have nothing but manna to eat, that they miss the food they enjoyed in Egypt. Of course, they were slaves in Egypt and probably did not have the variety of foods they thought they remembered.

our strength is dried up: The word translated "strength" is *nepshesh*, which is literally the throat. Martin Noth translates the clause, "Now our throat is dry," and says it means the manna "kills the appetite." [1]

[7-9: These verses describe the appearance and use of the manna. See Exodus 16:14-31.]

10-16: Moses hears the people. Both Yahweh and Moses become angry with them. Moses complains about the burden of leading the people because they demand so much. He asks Yahweh to kill him so he will not have to feel the burden. (In Exodus 32:32 Moses asked God to blot him out of the book of life if he would not forgive the people for making themselves gods of gold. Yahweh refused.) Yahweh calls for a convocation of the elders of the people.

[17-23: Yahweh promises to lighten the burden of Moses leadership. He tells Moses to consecrate the people. They will eat meat for a month and it will become loathsome to them.]

24-29: Seventy elders receive a share of Moses' spirit and prophesy. Eldad and Medad were not among the seventy, but they, too, received the gift of the spirit and prophesied.

Eldad...Medad...were among those registered: The only registration mentioned previously is in Exodus 30:12-14 and Numbers 1:18 in which all men 18 and over were registered and taxed. The registration here suggests that it was a credentialing of those who were authorized to prophesy.

Joshua: Joshua, reflecting the attitudes of those charged with keeping order, is irritated by the undisciplined actions of Eldad and Medad, but Moses accepts and endorses this manifestation of Yahweh's power though they were not registered. Their gift, though different from the more formal investment of spirit and prophecy in the seventy was nevertheless a manifestation of Moses spirit.

[30-35: The chapter concludes with the provision of quails to satisfy the demand for a change in diet. Quails have already been provided, along with the manna, in Exodus 16:13a.]

Because of the way the chapter has been broken up by omitting verses, the effect of the reading is to focus our attention on the origin of prophecy in the imposition of the spirit of Moses on the elders. Perhaps Eldad and Medad, who also receive Moses' spirit and prophesy, indeed who are explicitly approved by Moses, are examples of an uncontrolled charismatic prophecy.

Psalm 19:7-14

{7} The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; {8} the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; {9} the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. {10} More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. {11} Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. {12} But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. {13} Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. {14} Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

7-9. *law...decrees...precepts...commandment...fear...ordinances*: The qualities of Yahweh's law are perfection, dependability, righteous, plain, pure and true.

10-11: The law is of great value and reward.

12-13. *hidden faults...the insolent*: "...there are infractions and unintentional failures that give rise to accusation (v. 12). Praise (vv.7-10) suddenly turns into a petition that Yahweh may absolve 'his servant' of all the failures of which he is unaware." [2]

14: Psalm 19 closes with a formula of dedication (cf. Ps. 104:34; 119:108). [3]

James 5:13-20

{13} Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. {14} Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. {15} The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. {16} Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. {17} Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. {18} Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest. {19} My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, {20} you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

13-15: Three life situations and the appropriate Christian responses. The first two are very general. The third is dealt with in more detail. A sick person should call for the elders who will pray and anoint the sick person with oil in the name of the Lord. It is the prayer of faith rather than the oil that will heal the sick, and bring about the forgiveness of sins.

16-18: This is an admonition to intercessory prayers for forgiveness and healing. Elijah is an example of one whose prayers were effective. So, the righteous are to pray for one another because their prayers are effective.

19-20: An admonition to restore an apostate brother or sister. There is no instruction about how to do this, but the assurance that whoever does it will save the sinner's soul.

a multitude of sins: Also 1 Peter 4:8. The saying is based on Proverbs 10:12. The phrase is not so much concerned with the quantity of sins possessed by either the saved apostate or the restorer but "rather displays the very great effectiveness of his deed in erasing sins." [4]

One of James' primary concerns is harmony and peace in the communal life of the Christian community. If criticism and judgment are directed to admonition and restoration rather than alienation and condemnation, the community is strengthened and made whole. "The little community regulation which we read in Matt 18:15ff. can be regarded as a development of the paraenesis in our passage, or a related Judaeo-Christian paraenesis, into a community rule.... In the Matthean version there is not only the counsel to correct the sinner but also instruction about the course of action to be adopted in case he cannot be corrected." [5]

Mark 9:38-50

{38} John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." {39} But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. {40} Whoever is not against us is for us. {41} For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. {42} "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. {43} If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. {44} {45} And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. {46} {47} And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, {48} where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. {49} "For everyone will be salted with fire. {50} Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

There is a note of irony in verses 38-40 which are like Numbers 11:26-29. In Numbers Joshua asks Moses to stop Eldad and Medad from prophesying, while in Mark Joshua (Jesus) does not stop an unnamed individual from healing in his name. Both Moses and Jesus express a desire that others should accept the responsibility of being prophets.

38. *John said to him*: On this occasion and on that in Mark 10:35 John seems to be

concerned about infringements on his status. [6]

in your name: See also "a deed of power in my name" in verse 39. The one who acts "in Jesus' name" is acting as a broker for Jesus, that is, (s)he is acting as Jesus' agent with Jesus' authority.

40. *Whoever is not against us is for us*: See Matthew 12:30; Luke 11:23: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." Both statements, though contrary to each other, are true.

41. *because you bear the name of Christ*: In verses 39-40, the question was whether one could act as a broker in the name of Jesus if he/she was not a follower. Here the question is of those who bear the name of Christ, that is, who are his clients.

42. *these little ones who believe in me*: The "little ones" are identified with a child in the parallel text in Matthew 18:1-7. However, "the 'little ones' referred to here are lowborn persons committed to following Jesus. This theme of the lowborn, begun with the insistence on reversal of status in vv. 34-37, concludes with this verse." [7] So, it includes the unidentified man who was healing.

43-47: "These verses are a parable on recompense for moral behavior. Should one's previous activity (hands and feet) or one's preferred ways of thinking and judging (eye) cause a person to succumb in tests of loyalty to God (temptation), one must put an end to such behavior. For it is better to endure the difficulties of putting an end to them now than to be requited with pain later."

48. *their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched*: In Isaiah 66:24 the fate of those who have rebelled against Yahweh is described in these words. [8]

49. *salted with fire*: "The combination of the metaphors of salt and fire suggests the idea of purifying, and it is not improbable that Jesus meant that in the eschatological situation in which His disciples stood every man would be tried and purified by the fires of persecution and suffering. Evil would be destroyed and good preserved." [9]

50. *if salt has lost its saltiness*: Salt cannot literally "lose its saltiness." It could become adulterated and so lose its flavor. When that happens the saltiness can not be easily restored. Salt was used less for flavoring than for preservation. If it becomes adulterated it is also less useful for preservation.

be at peace with one another: The passage ends with an admonition to maintain peace within the community. "A declaration that the way to peace is a life seasoned as with the astringent qualities of salt, perhaps, as we should say, with common sense, appears to be the meaning of the passage. The psalmist prays that (s)he may keep the law, and be kept from hidden faults, that his/her words and thoughts may be acceptable to Yahweh.

Reflection

One general theme that covers the readings is that of peace and harmony in the community. The challenge of unauthorized people prophesying, teaching, healing, and in general acting with authority has been with God's people from the time of Moses. Should such self-authorized "professors" be repudiated and rejected, or should they be allowed. Both Moses and Jesus refused to stop unauthorized people from performing ministry. We should not generalize on their permissive attitude. They may have had sound reason for their attitude in these specific cases. But neither should we automatically reject demonstrations of the spirit which differ from those familiar to us. "Whoever is not against us is for us."

When we encounter sin in the community, love will lead us to seek to restore the sinner, rather than to condemn and destroy him/her. In James the encouragement to restore a wandering brother or sister is supported by the warning not to cause a weaker brother or sister to stumble, to avoid occasions for sin, and to be at peace with one another. God knows our frailties and failings and we pray that by grace we may be kept from those things

that harm us and be led in the way of salvation.

Hymns [10]

With One Voice (e.g. 762v), *Hymnal Supplement* 1991 (e.g. 725s) and *LBW* (e.g. 32).

E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, P=Psalm; II=Second Lesson; G=Gospel

441 --E--Eternal Spirit of

503 --D--O Jesus, I

132 --P--Come, You Faithful,

360 --II--O Christ, the

126 --II--Where Charity and

429 --G--Where Cross the

439, 499, 793s/772v, 270

Prayers of the People [11]

We walk with confidence O God, because you are with us on our journey of service in Christ's name. Help us to live together in a spirit of harmony, praying for one another and supporting one another in Christ. We come with our cups of cold water. **God who calls us again and again hear our prayer.**

By the Holy Spirit, Gracious God, you bring together churches and faiths in conversation. In that journey for understanding and peace, help us to listen carefully so that we may hear. Help us to speak clearly so that we may be heard. Bless our Bishop, Telmor, who meets this week with the Roman Catholic hosted gathering of island clergy in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. **God who calls us again and again hear our prayer.**

Or [12]

Presider or deacon

Gathered in the Spirit of God, let us pray for all the needs of the world.

Deacon or other leader

For *N* our bishop and *N* our presbyter, for this holy gathering, and for the people of God in every place.

For mercy, justice, and peace among all peoples.

For abundant fruits of the earth and for this good and bountiful world.

For our city and those who live in it and for our families, companions, and all those we love.

For all those in desperate need: the sick and the suffering, prisoners, captives, and their families, the hungry, homeless, and oppressed.

For those who rest in Christ and for all the dead.

For pardon for all our transgressions.

Lifting our voices with all creation, with the blessed Virgin Mary Michael and all the angels, and all the saints, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ.

To you, O Lord.

Presider

God of healing and salvation, hear the prayers we offer this day, forgive us our sins, and receive us into your kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Notes

[1] Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968, p. 86.

[2] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988, p. 275.

[3] *Loc. cit.*

[4] Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976, p. 259.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 260.

[6] A patron is a powerful individual who controls resources and helps clients who are dependent on the aid of a patron to survive. Brokers mediate between patrons and clients. See Bruce Malina & Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. p. 235-237, or K.C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, pp. 70-86.

[7] Bruce Malina & Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. p. 239.

[8] *Loc. cit.*

[9] Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1955, p. 413.

[10] <http://www.worship.on.ca/text/rclb9900.txt>

[11] http://www.worship.on.ca/text/pray_b2.txt

[12] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>