

Reflection

Exodus 14:19-31

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

It might not seem like it, but for once we have a fairly clear theme that connects all three readings. They are all about asymmetrical power and its effects. When we are at the upper end of this asymmetrical power, it is hard for us to see its effects, or even to appreciate that it is happening. It is always easier to identify with the escaping Israelites than to ask ourselves in what ways we are like the Egyptians. Let's look briefly at each of these readings and see what they say on the theme.

The power is most obvious in the Old Testament reading. The Egyptians have enslaved and mistreated the Israelites, now they are being rescued to begin their journey towards their new life of freedom. The emphasis of this passage is not the question of whether it occurred literally as is outlined in the story – Jewish readers would say that question misses the point. The point of the story (as with all the biblical stories) is what it tells us about God and God's relationship with us.

Now, of course, the modern reader probably still has a bit of a problem with the complete destruction of the Egyptian army. That army probably included other slaves or people conscripted in to fight whether they wanted to or not. To put it in modern terms, we might celebrate if a miracle wiped out the Russian army, especially those in Ukraine, but many of us would still have compassion on those who were drafted in, saw this as an exit from terrible prisons, or were otherwise pressured to go and fight.

The ancient writer did not worry as much about these ethics. Instead we see an image of God rescuing an oppressed people from the hands of the oppressor. This is not God who acts from a distance, but one who works closely with the people God loves. Moses is called to act as the intermediary and stretch his hands over the waters. It reminds us that God is not distant from the people.

The other important point this story makes about God and our relationship with God is that we work in partnership with God. The people do not simply stand still and watch the destruction. They have their action to take as well. They need to trust God and walk through the Sea of Reeds to do their part to get to freedom.

The Romans reading asks us to reflect on the power that we have in our church communities. Unlike Paul's other letters, in Romans he was introducing himself to a community he did not know. That he includes today's instructions tells us this was a common problem – the interface between culture and religion, although in this case there is overlap between the two because all too often "meat" included what was offered in temples to the local gods. Having previously (in last week's readings) reminded us that "love is the

fulfilment of the law," Paul tells us to respond in love and not critique those who find the practices of the law helpful to their faith (and likewise, not to condemn those who do not).

In the church that are receiving this letter, the Gentile Christians probably hold the power, because the Jews had been expelled from Rome and are only now returning, including Jewish Christians back into the community. He is reminding the Christian community to not discriminate against those who practice their faith in different ways.

In our Gospel reading we see the power between the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven. As a quick aside, when forgiveness becomes a matter of "should" or "ought" it becomes spiritually abusive. The most obvious point is that human forgiveness is rooted in divine forgiveness. The king forgives the servant and incalculable amount of indebtedness. Ten thousand talents represents more than the wages of a day labourer for 150,000 years!

The servant in this story sees the forgiveness of his debt in terms of justice (and perhaps wanting to pay back the king a bit faster decides to speed up the return on his lending). Forgiveness, for him, is part of a transaction that is about "me and my rights," a concept that is rather prevalent in our society today. What this parable does is turn forgiveness into the question of "how do we relate to each other?" It also reminds us to be aware of who has the power in a relationship – and therefore how we use it.

We could take these connected thoughts in many different directions, but given this is the Season of Creation, let us stop and reflect on what this means for our relationship with the Creation, that God said is good.

At the time the Bible was written, Creation certainly had the power over humanity. Humans were at its mercy for a wide range of natural disasters. Of course, we are still at the mercy of many of these disasters, but the power dynamics have swung to a different point. An increasing number of natural disasters are attributed to the effects of what we do as humans to our planet. Fires, floods, and droughts are occurring at an increasing rate because of the actions of humans on creation.

Quite aside from the declaration at the start of the Bible that creation is good, we also have the ways this impacts up on other people – typically the most vulnerable peoples are also the most affected by climate change. I think of the drought in Africa from 2020 that has led to over 43,000 people dying in one year in Somalia alone. Once this would have made headlines around the world, but we have been too distracted by the many other issues that have consumed us since our Black Summer of bushfires. What does it mean for us to be in relationship with people who have suffered the effects of our lifestyles?

And so we are invited to reflect on what this power relationship looks like today. If the crossing of the Sea of Reeds was today, who would be on which side? What is it that we are called to offer in response to God's great generosity to us?