# Trinity 3

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| *Mattins* | 1 Samuel 2 |
| *Introit* | Psalm 119:17-24 |
| *Epistle* | 1 Peter 5:5b-11 |
| *Gospel* | Luke 15:1-10 |
| *Evensong* | 1 Samuel 3 |

## EPISTLE AND GOSPEL

At first glance, the epistle and gospel for Trinity 3 might seem ill-matched. The gospel emphasizes rejoicing with God, the epistle resistance to the Devil. The gospel shows us the work of an active God, depicted as a shepherd seeking a lost sheep and as a woman seeking a lost coin. In these parables, the sheep and the coin are passive recipients of rescue. By contrast, the epistle is a call to activity for members of a first-century Christian community, with imperatives directed to the human readers: "humble," "cast," "discipline," "keep," and "resist" (NRSVue). What God does in the epistle, apart from the statement that "he cares for you," is primarily located in the future: he will act, but only "in due time" and after "a little while." By contrast, what God does in the gospel is a restoration of humanity. This work of divine rescue, the kingdom of God, is not put off; it is already here.

To see the connection between the readings, we must look again at the beginning of the gospel. The gospel begins with two sets of people: "the publicans and sinners" (Luke 15:1 KJV) and "the Pharisees and scribes" (Luke 15:2 KJV). The first group is moving toward Jesus and listening to him. The second group is appalled. They "murmured" (KJV) and were "grumbling" (NRSVue). In other words, it is a replay of Exodus: Jesus is doing God's work of delivering his people from bondage, while the critics are adopting the same posture as the ungrateful people in the wilderness.[1]

Jesus's parables in Luke 15 are directed at these critics, including the parables in today's gospel and the more famous parable just off-stage. Smugly superior, these critics complain about Jesus paling around with the hated tax collectors and rejected sinners. "We would never do that, we are better than that," you can hear the Pharisees and scribes saying.

Now what is a Christian today supposed to make of these homespun stories, and of their rhetorical attack on the Pharisees and scribes? One response is easy to hand. We can read about the Pharisees and scribes and say: "We would never do that, we are better than that." St. Peter would like a word with you. The epistle from 1 Peter 5 begins: "All of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility." All of us? Even us? Even to the tax collectors and sinners who just joined us? Even to the workers who arrived in the vineyard in the last hour (Matthew 20:9)? Even to the son who wasted all the father's estate in Las Vegas (the rest of Luke 15)?

Admittedly, the Authorized Version is a bit paraphrastic. A more literal rendering of 1 Peter 5:5 would be: "In the same way, you who are younger, be subject to the elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'" In effect, the Authorized Version is reading "and all of you" as elliptical, as if it were "and all of you *do that too, submitting to one another, and* clothe yourselves with humility." Still, the paraphrase does capture the movement of the passage, which immediately goes from an expression of hierarchical submission (young submitting to old in 5:5a) to an expression of the universal 360° submission that is supposed to mark the Christian community and its relationships (5:5b; cf. John 13:1-15; Galatians 5:13; Ephesians 5:21).

When Peter says, "clothe yourselves with humility," he is invoking the image of a slave. The verb rendered "clothe yourselves" (ἐγκομβώσασθε), used only here in the New Testament, is cognate with a noun for a "tied-on garment, apron, usu. of slaves."[2] The image Peter is invoking is "the binding of an apron, as done by slaves in performance of their domestic duties, including washing the feet of guests."[3] The servant is not above his master (John 13:16).

The epistle reading draws out the ethical implications of the gospel reading. We may be inclined to hear the gospel and think that the moral sense, the example we are to imitate, is the activity of the shepherd and the woman: we are supposed to go through hill and dale and to search through the cupboards. But the juxtaposition with the epistle offers a different moral sense from the parables: what is our response to the work that God is doing? When God brings the hated and rejected into his kingdom, saving sinners, do we meet this work with grumbling or joy? Do we keep ourselves apart in confidence that we are better, or do we submit ourselves to each other, clothing ourselves with humility?

And St. Peter gives a reason for humility that casts each one of our own acts of mutual submission in a cosmic context: "for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5 KJV, quoting Proverbs 3:34). That theme is reinforced by Archbishop Cranmer's introit for this Sunday, which warns, "Thou hast rebuked the proud" (Psalm 119:21). The path of humility is the only safe course.

Yet even as we choose this path, the epistle and gospel jointly remind us of God's mercy and affection toward us. In the words of a Lutheran commentator, these readings "teach God's loving care . . . whether for those who suffer affliction" (epistle) "or those who for a time wander away and are 'lost'" (gospel).[4]

As we meditate on this contrast between pride and humility, it is worth pausing to consider the editorial choices in the lectionary, and how they differ from the editorial choices that some might make. The most obvious is probably the fact that the traditional Western one-year eucharistic lectionary does not include the Parable of the Prodigal Son, even though it does include the immediately preceding Parable of the Lost Sheep and Parable of the Lost Coin.[5] The parable of the two brothers is deservedly famous, and there is no secret of its attraction for preachers.[6] Preachers of that parable ably struggle to put the focus on the older brother, whose response is central to the story. Yet the draw of the plot and the transformation of the younger brother are usually too much. What verses 1-10 lack in drama for the ages, they make up for in plain directness. They tell us who is coming to Jesus; they tell us

who is upset about it. And they allow a dialogue with the epistle, without overwhelming or overshadowing it.

Another editorial choice is that the Book of Common Prayer, following the traditional one-year Western eucharistic lectionary, slices a sentence in half. What gets cut out is the "hierarchical" half: in the Christian community, the younger submit to the older (1 Peter 5:5a). What gets left in is the "egalitarian" half: in the Christian community, everyone submits to everyone (1 Peter 5:5b). A remarkably similar choice is made at another place in the traditional Western eucharistic lectionary, the epistle for Trinity 20. Here the epistle reading is from Ephesians 5, beginning in verse 15. The epistle is unusually short, and it ends with verse 21: "submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God." Yet another similar choice is made by the Book of Common Prayer compilers for the epistles in Eastertide: Easter 2 has 1 Peter 2:19-25 on suffering like Jesus Christ, Easter 3 has 1 Peter 2:11-17 with a theme of submission that includes not only "Honour the king" but also "Honour all men." Exactly one verse is omitted in between these Eastertide epistle readings: "Servants" – i.e., slaves – "be subject to your masters with all fear . . . ."

The lectionary's boundaries are not arbitrary, for they are teaching us how to read the Scriptures. The choices just outlined emphasize the freedom of the Christian man and woman, and their submission to one another, finding the model for this submissive humility in the life and death of Jesus Christ. In other words, the lectionary is teaching us – all of us – how to follow the example of our Savior's "great humility" (BCP 49, 100). This not a eucharistic lectionary designed for patriarchal purposes; it is not the eucharistic lectionary that would have been designed by a slaveholder in the American South.

For some of these choices, the compilers of the Book of Common Prayer do not receive independent credit. Archbishop Cranmer and his compatriots were simply following the historic Western pattern of beginning one epistle with 1 Peter 5:5b and ending another with Ephesians 5:21. The Eastertide epistles were less conventional. Yet regardless of origins, the cumulative effect of these editorial choices is not random.

This effect is conspicuously reinforced in the Book of Common Prayer by the proper lessons for Sunday Mattins. On Trinity 3, when 1 Peter 5:5a is omitted, the proper lesson is 1 Samuel 2. On Trinity 20, when the epistle ends with Ephesians 5:21, the proper lesson is Joel 2. Both of these proper lessons revel in the prophesying of women and of the young; both celebrate, *Magnificat*-style, the divine overturning of human hierarchies. For anyone whose program is the promotion of a race, gender, or class hierarchy, the 1662 Sunday lectionary deserves a warning label.

## PROPER LESSONS

The first lesson at Mattins is 1 Samuel 2, and at Evensong 1 Samuel 3. These lessons present the song of Hannah, the judgment on Eli's house, and the call of Samuel. The divine reversal theme – the mighty put down, the low raised up – is vividly presented in Hannah's song, which is of course a model for the Blessed Virgin Mary's song. But that theme is also presented in narrative form, with the contrast between the sons of the high priest and the son of Hannah. And just as Hannah's song prefigures Mary's, Hannah's son prefigures Mary's (compare 1 Samuel 2:26 with Luke 2:52).

This theme of divine reversal is reinforced in the movement from the previous Sunday's proper lessons and to the following Sunday's proper lessons. The previous week has the only two lessons for Sundays from the Book of Judges, namely chapters four and five: the triumph and triumph song of Deborah the prophet.[7] The following week skips forward to the denunciation of kings by Samuel the prophet, and the weakness and foolishness of Saul the king. Taken together, this cluster of six chapters – Judges 4 and 5, 1 Samuel 2 and 3, and 1 Samuel 12 and 13 – offers the rudiments of a political theology that is not uncritical of state power. Here in Trinitytide it underscores the themes of the *Magnificat* that are present in today's epistle and gospel.

There is one note of difference, however, between the proper lessons for today and the gospel. In Luke 15, Jesus tells the parables as

pointed attacks on the Pharisees and scribes, though he ends the Parable of the Prodigal Son with an unfinished response; there is room for the older brother, too, at the feast, if only he will come inside. Yet there is a different ending in 1 Samuel 2 and 3. Eli demands to know from the boy Samuel what God told him. When Samuel tells him of the limitless judgment to come, Eli responds in a way that the Pharisees and scribes are not recorded as responding: "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him" (1 Samuel 3:18 RSV). Under the circumstances, given the message, this is as close as Eli could possibly come to a proto-*Nunc*.

## HYMNS

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| *Mattins 1* | Hail to the Lord's anointed |
| *Epistle* | Blest are the pure in heart |
| *Gospel* | There's a wideness in God's mercy |
| *Evensong 1* | Lord, speak to me, that I may speak |

# ENDNOTES

1 Indeed, in the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the shepherd has the sheep "in the wilderness" (Luke 15:4).

2 Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek: ἐγκόμβωμα.

3 John H. Elliott, *I Peter* (2000) (Anchor Yale Bible 37B), 724.

4 Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy: A Study of the Common Liturgy of the Lutheran Church in America* (2d ed. 1947), 523.

5 In Mattins and Evensong, however, one option for the sentences at the start of the service is from the Parable of the Prodigal Son (BCP 2, 18).

6 See Peter J. Williams, *The Surprising Genius of Jesus: What the Gospels Reveal about the Greatest Teacher* (2023).

7 It is possible that the reason Archbishop Parker, in 1561, chose to highlight these two chapters out of the whole of Judges was the identification of Queen Elizabeth I as a new Deborah.