

**OPENING COLLECT**

O Lord, we beseech you mercifully to hear the prayers of your people who call upon you; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil them; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

**FIRST READING: Ezekiel 18.1-4, 25-32**

1 The word of the LORD came to me:  
2 What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?  
3 As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. 4 Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die. 25 Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is unfair.'  
Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? 26 When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. 27 Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. 28 Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die.  
29 Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is unfair.' O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? 30 Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. 31 Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? 32 For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live.

Today's readings are quite difficult to handle. The Gospel passage is really about the authority of Jesus and grapples with the question of why the religious leaders, of the day, failed to respond to his teaching. The situation is not unlike that faced by Ezekiel in the C.6<sup>th</sup>. BC. The people of God are in exile in Babylon, which the prophet says, as have others before him, is the result of their way of life, which has not been as God would wish. They have not been walking the way of love; love of God and love of their neighbour. They cannot, however, accept that God has been fair. Hence their use of the proverb (v.2), which suggests that they are suffering for the sins of their forefathers. Ezekiel, though, says that they are no better than those who preceded them, and that unless they accept this, they will not find salvation. "Repent and turn", he says, and "get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit", and he concludes, succinctly, "Turn and live"(vv.30-1). The challenge reminds one of the verse in the C.8<sup>th</sup>. prophet Amos, in chapter five. "Seek me and ye shall live"(v.32). The offer of God is there, and his messengers, the prophets, those who 'speak for him', are sent to recall the people to the way of love. The problem is that it is difficult to hear the message, the 'word of God', if you are convinced that you have got it right and do not need to change your ways. It was a problem in Ezekiel's day, a problem for the religious leaders of Jesus' time, and is, surely, just as great a problem for us today!!

**SECOND READING: Philippians 2.1-13**

1 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2 make my joy complete:  
be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. : 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.5 Let the same mind be in you that was in

**For Dedication Festival:**

**Kings 8.22-30:** Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple. Praising God for his faithfulness and steadfast love, the King asks that he will bless his reign and hear the prayers of his people with mercy.

**Hebrews 12.18-24:** In Heb.10.20, the writer speaks of Jesus as opening a 'new and living way 'to come to God, which the faithful of the past had only dreamt of. Then, in ch.12, he explores the implications of this and speaks of the confidence we should have, in faith, to approach God. So, in today's passage, he contrasts the relationship with God of the people of the time of Moses, with our own. We can come to the God of love without fear.

**Epistle continued**, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, <sup>8</sup> he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup> Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup> for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

### **Gospel : Matthew 21.23–32**

<sup>23</sup> When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?'  
<sup>24</sup> Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>25</sup> Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?'  
And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven," he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?"' <sup>26</sup> But if we say, "Of human origin," we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' <sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.'  
And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. <sup>28</sup> What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today."  
<sup>29</sup> He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup> The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir";  
but he did not go. <sup>31</sup> Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.'

**Matthew 21.12-16:** The story of Jesus cleansing the Temple reminds us that, although Jesus has placed us in a 'new and living' relationship with God, the religious authorities can put things in the way. Like the Temple of old, our churches are to be the means of bringing all into a living relationship with the God of steadfast love.

#### **Notes for the Epistle:**

More from Philippians, and, in a way, the words of Paul, to the young church, fit well with the other two passages we are reading. Paul goes to the heart of discipleship. Be humble and listen to others, we might say, and remember that it is not all about personal righteousness and reward. We are not to look simply to our own interests, but are to be concerned with 'the interests of others' (v.4). We are to have the 'mind of Jesus', who emptied himself (v.7), and to 'work out our salvation with fear and trembling', which surely means taking the servant role, and being zealous to draw all into the realm of God's love; to will and to work for his good pleasure (v.13)!

Being humble enough to hear what God's prophet is saying is the problem of the chief priests and elders and, as we are often told, of 'the Scribes and the Pharisees'. The teaching of Jesus clearly made them feel uncomfortable, especially when he mingled with, and sought to love into the Kingdom, those whom they considered beyond redemption. If they were to change their ways and accept his teaching, then they would need to be convinced of his authority, perhaps even given a sign! However, faith is not like that. Every one of us has to make the decision for God, or for Jesus, for ourselves. So, Jesus' question to them is a clever one, and rather than admit they could be wrong, they refuse to answer. The brief 'parable' that follows seems like a comment on this. The tax-collectors and prostitutes excluded by the religious leaders, are finding their way to God. The religious leaders, by contrast, appear to have said 'yes' to God, but are not walking the way of love as he intends. They do not realise that, like Jesus, they are to welcome all the children of God into the kingdom of blessing! Today's readings should make us ask, at any rate from time to time, whether we are really walking along the path of love; living with the mind of Jesus; zealous to share our way of life with all.

#### **Post-Communion Collect:**

Almighty God, you have taught us through your Son that love is the fulfilling of the law:  
grant that we may love you with our whole heart and our neighbours as ourselves;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**