

Friday in the First Week of Lent

February 26, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Esther 14:1–6, 12–14; Psalm 138; Psalm 51:11; Matthew 7:7–12

Today's reading from Ezekiel is familiar to me from the Daily Office and its use on the Sunday in Year A nearest September 28. Today's gospel is from Matthew. It is Jesus' second day in Jerusalem. He is in the temple. There is an exchange between Jesus and the chief priests, and the elders. When they inquire about his authority to teach, Jesus responds by asking, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"¹ They refuse to answer. So, Jesus responds to them with the Parable of the Two Sons: "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?"

Back to Ezekiel. The eighteenth chapter, from which today's first lesson is taken, is called "The Lord's Way is Just" by Arnold Tkacik in his article on Ezekiel in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*.² The prophet Ezekiel was among the first group of exiles to be taken to Babylon after Judah fell to Nebuchadnezzar II's army in 597 B.C. About this chapter Tkacik, "Although the principle of individual responsibility does not originate with Ezekiel . . . he gives it the most [clear] formulations and extensive scrutiny."³

Contrast that with this verse from Exodus, "I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me."⁴

There are two passages from Ezekiel appointed to be read at the Great Vigil of Easter. The first begins, "Thus says the Lord God, 'For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own

¹ Matthew 21:25.

² Arnold J. Tkacik, "Ezekiel," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary: Volume I: The Old Testament*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 344–65.

³ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁴ Exodus 20:5.

land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh . . . and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.’ ”⁵ The next lesson is Ezekiel’s most famous prophesy. It begins, “The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out . . . and set me down in the midst of the valley; it was full of bones . . . and behold, there were very many upon the valley; and lo, they were very dry. And he said to me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ ”⁶

I think the pairing of the gospel lesson with the passage from Ezekiel is to encourage us to take responsibility for our lives as God enables us. In the end, life and eternal life are God’s gifts to us.

In Lent, my soul misses Rite One, the traditional language of the Prayer Book. Back in the day, services of Sunday Morning Prayer and Sermon began with a sentence of scripture and the Confession of Sin. Some of its phrases are missing from Rite One in our Prayer Book. I think it’s worth recalling the original during Lent: “Almighty and most merciful Father; We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou those who are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind In Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.”⁷

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁵ Ezekiel 36:24–28.

⁶ Ezekiel 37:1–3.

⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1928), 6.