

Morning Prayer: Readings and Reflections

For Monday 16th to Saturday 21st May

Monday 16th May

Numbers 9:15-23 & 10:33-36 Luke 4:38-44

The Lectionary jumps from the end of Exodus to Numbers chapter 9 but you will benefit from reading chapters 1-8. The lists might not seem exciting but you don't want to miss out on the Israelite camp shaped like a giant cross (ch2), the intriguing Nazirites (ch6), the glorious Aaronic blessing (6:22-27) or the inspiring generosity of the people as they worship God (ch7). The passage in Numbers 9 seems a bit excessive – after verse 17 you might want to say “we get the point already!” But do we? The Israelites finally leave Sinai (10:11-13) and they are marching for battle: they march in “divisions” and the trumpets that call people to start travelling are also trumpets of war (10:9). The Church on earth is “The Church Militant”. Do you see the Christian life as a battle? It is. But we must also see that victory depends on the LORD! When we “fight the good fight” we *must* follow Jesus closely. However he leads, we must follow (9:15-23). Do you get the point: make sure you are following Jesus! Whenever the ark set out, Moses prayed (10:35, cf. Psalm 68). In our own spiritual warfare, prayer is essential (Ephesians 6:18).

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”

PRAY: Pray that you will hallow God's name by fighting the enemy of sin in your life.

Tuesday 17th May

Numbers 11 Luke 5:1-11

As followers of Christ, do we lose or gain? Jesus says “Follow me” and the fishermen leave everything behind (Luke 5:11). The Israelites are focussed on what they left behind (Numbers 11:5) rather than the LORD who is with them (11:20). What do you want most of all: cucumbers or Christ?! Our grumbling hearts easily fixate on created things, not the Creator. What we want is very often NOT what we need, and it is entirely possible to have too much of a good thing. When each day becomes a bit same-y, when you get bored of daily faithfulness to God and forget that it is a miracle that he gives you new mercy every morning (11:6) remember that the Father has given you his Son. And his Spirit! (11:29 cf. Acts 2). When we follow Christ we might lose the world but we gain *him*, and with him, the very life of God.

“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.”

PRAY: Pray that our love of God's King would triumph over the alluring love of the world and that we would trust God in the day-in day-out task of faithful obedience.

Wednesday 18th May

Numbers 12 Luke 5:12-26

Moses had a Cushite wife – she was a foreigner who probably had black skin. Miriam and Aaron clearly do not like her; they complain about Moses (v2) but this is a cover-up for racist attitudes (v1). Problems of racism in the church go back a long way. God is angered and paler-skinned Miriam ends up deathly white with leprosy. In the Old Testament the disease labelled ‘leprosy’ brought defilement when sores were more than skin deep, when raw flesh was exposed (Lev. 13). We try to put on appearances but when our real nature, our ‘flesh’ is exposed, sin is revealed in all its ugliness (Mark 7:20-23). Only Jesus can make us clean on the outside and inside (Luke 5:13). We need Jesus to forgive his church from the sins of racism and arrogance.

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

PRAY: Pray that God will provide for the poorer nations of the world and the many communities that may be overlooked because of the racism and arrogance of the powerful.

Thursday 19th May

Numbers 13

Luke 5:27-39

Numbers 13-14 record a colossal failure of faith. In Acts 14:22 Paul and Barnabas tell the disciples to remain true to the faith: "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God". What do you focus on? The size of the hardships, or the glory of the kingdom of God? Twelve spies spend 40 days in the Promised Land. Ten of them focus on the size of the hardships: "We can't do it, we're not strong enough!" Two of them focus on the glory of the kingdom: a land flowing with milk and honey, a land of extravagant fruitfulness. We can follow their example by allowing the Luke reading to inspire us. Take time to think about the glory that is coming when Jesus returns to bring us into the promised New Creation. Consider the great feast he will prepare for repentant sinners. Anticipate the wedding of Christ the Bridegroom to his Bride the Church – and the quality of the wine he will serve... The resurrected Jesus is the firstfruits of the New Creation, the promise of unimaginable joy!

"And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

PRAY: What sins of unbelief or grumbling do you need to confess to God?

Friday 20th May

Numbers 14:1-25

Luke 6:1-11

The Church is constantly tempted to go back to Egypt – thinking that God's ways are not as good as the world's ways. We frequently turn away from the way of the cross, forgetting the Lord of the cross and the life he offers. Here Israel refuses to trust in the LORD their God (14:11) and an unbelieving generation is doomed to die in the wilderness. If only they – and we! – would listen to the gospel and combine it with faith (Hebrews 4:1-3). We need to believe the good news from Numbers 14: Jesus' promised future is amazing (v7); he will lead us (v8); he is with us now (v9); he has proven himself with miracles (v11); he has been seen face-to-face (v14 see 1 John 1:1-2); he is slow to anger, abounding in love, pardoning all who repent (v17-19).

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

PRAY: Where are you tempted to complain against God, thinking that the world offers a better life than the one offered by Jesus? Ask for deliverance from unbelief.

Saturday 21st May

Numbers 14:26-45

Luke 6:12-26

With their wicked grumbling and complaining, the unbelieving generation of Israelites condemn themselves to die in the wilderness. This passage should make us tremble. Jesus pronounces great blessings but also delivers fearful woes (Luke 6:20-26) and we need to listen to both. If Christ's call to "follow me" should lead us into poverty, hunger, weeping or exclusion – do we still believe that our Saviour is of infinitely more value than the treasures and attention of the world? Hebrews chapters 3 and 4 reflect on this story. Make a priority of giving time to read those two chapters. Listen to the warnings and the exhortations. Allow the word of God to uncover your heart and open your eyes to a sympathetic and merciful High Priest. Trust Joshua/Jesus; hold firmly to the faith, so that you may enter the Rest he provides.

"For the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory are yours, now and forever. Amen."

PRAY: After a prayerful reading of Hebrews 3-4, make sure you end with praise.

Collect for 5th Sunday of Easter (use it every day):

Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ have overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: grant that, as by your grace going before us you put into our minds good desires, so by your continual help we may bring them to good effect; through Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen.

Morning Prayer: Readings and Reflections

For Monday 23rd to Saturday 28th May

Monday 23rd May

Numbers 16:1-35

Luke 6:27-38

Can unholy people approach a holy God without a mediator? Numbers 16-17 gives us an emphatic “No”. Fallen humanity *cannot* approach the blazing purity of God’s holiness unless we have a High Priest, a mediator to bridge the gap. Korah and company want to bypass Aaron and approach God on their own terms (look ahead to Numbers 16:40). The ground opens up and swallows them all down to the grave. We fall into their error today when people imagine they can bypass Jesus and approach God on their own terms – perhaps trusting in their own goodness or religiosity. Other religions do not have Christ as Mediator, which means no other religion can give people access to the one true God. But God invites everyone to simply trust in Jesus. All we need is God’s mercy, freely given in Christ, and we can live. Many Psalms were written by “The Sons of Korah” – perhaps, even as the ground opened up, some called for mercy and were spared.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”

PRAY: God is holy – so we should hallow his name. Pray that friends you know will hallow God’s name by recognising God’s holiness and approaching him with faith in Christ.

Tuesday 24th May

Numbers 16:36-50

Luke 6:39-49

The importance of Jesus, our Mediator and High Priest, is seen dramatically in today’s passage. Wrath comes out from the LORD but Aaron makes atonement. “He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped” (v48). Jesus our High Priest made atonement for us as, on the cross, he placed himself between us and the holy-wrath of God. Jesus became sin for us and was swallowed up by the grave; the earth covered over him as he lay in the tomb. The incense-censers became part of Israel’s altar and we have a true altar in Jesus. In his death for sinners we find healing and life: when we recognise we deserve death we are humbled and able to acknowledge the plank in our own eye; when we trust Jesus our hearts are changed; when we see the grace of our High Priest we are more willing to build our lives on his word.

“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.”

PRAY: God’s will is that people are saved (read 1 Timothy 2:3-6). Pray that churches in your area will proclaim Jesus, the one mediator between God and humanity.

Wednesday 25th May

Numbers 17

Luke 7:1-10

The Israelites cry out “We shall die! We are lost!” Our answer is “No! Have you learned *nothing?*!” Left to ourselves we are lost, that is true. But we have a High Priest. Aaron’s staff buds and blossoms to prove to all of Israel that they have been given a High Priest and the tribe of Levi by God precisely so that they *can* approach the tabernacle-dwelling of the LORD. Numbers 18:1-7 emphasises that priests and Levites are there so that they – *in Israel’s place* – will bear the consequence of Israel’s sin. But they must fulfil their task properly for this is a matter of life and death. Jesus came to seek and save the lost by bearing the consequence of your sin. In the wood of the cross we find life: abundant, fruitful life (Numbers 17:8). So follow the example of the centurion (Luke 7): in the face of death, trust that life is found in Jesus and his Word.

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

PRAY: Pray about your church finances, asking that (i) God will inspire generosity, so that (ii) our needs will be met, so that (iii) we can share the message of Jesus the life-giver.

Thursday: Ascension Day

Isaiah 52:7-15

Hebrews 7:11-28

Sometimes the lectionary is brilliant: Ascension Day comes after several days of thinking about the importance of the High Priest. That's exactly right. 40 days after the resurrection Jesus ascended into heaven to be our Great High Priest. Jesus, born from Judah's tribe, could not be a Levitical High Priest. The author of Hebrews points out that, before the Levites existed, the mysterious figure of Melchizedek pointed forward to a man who could be *both* King and High Priest. As High Priest, Jesus "is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them." Your salvation is guaranteed by the unending intercession of Jesus your High Priest. Exalted above the heavens, Jesus is the High Priest who meets our needs. Jesus is also our King, the suffering servant who has ascended to rule the world from the heavenly Zion (Isaiah 52). His reign is comfort for us and good news for the world.

For the next ten days, each prayer point will be based on "Thy Kingdom Come".

THY KINGDOM COME: "How beautiful ... are the feet of those who bring good news." Pray that we will gladly accept our mission to "Go into all the world and make disciples".

Friday 27th May

Numbers 20:1-13

Luke 7:11-17

Moses has been such a key figure since Exodus chapter 2. He is symbolic of Jesus in so many ways, but in Numbers 20 we remember that he is not the Messiah. Frustration rises in his heart and he strikes the rock, contrary to the LORD's instructions. Notice that the LORD identifies Moses' failure to trust as his main problem. Then we are told the location is Meribah, where Israel first received water from the rock (Exodus 17). Between then and Numbers 20 God's Law has been given in great detail, but for all the glory and wonder of God's Law it is unable to change the human heart (Rom. 8:3). How wonderful to turn to Luke 7 and see humanity as it should be. Jesus sees a doubly-bereaved woman and "his heart went out to her" (v13). The Old Testament is full of 'types' and 'shadows' of Christ but none of them are the reality. They are signs that point to the reality. Every page of the Old Testament should send us to Jesus.

THY KINGDOM COME: Call on God to send his Spirit to give us hearts like Jesus: full of compassion for the lost and broken. May God make us a church that weeps for the lost.

Saturday 28th May

Numbers 21:4-9

Luke 7:18-35

Jesus gives us a one-sentence understanding of our Numbers reading. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." (John 3:14-15) Israel sinned; the snakes were God's judgment bringing death to the people. We have sinned, and eternal death is God's judgment. But look to the cross! There Jesus became sin. There Jesus bore the judgment we deserve. There Jesus died. This is God's love for you: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Look at him and live.

THY KINGDOM COME: Great revivals often come after the church has been humbled, as the Spirit leads Christians into serious confession and repentance. Ask God to show us our sin, so that our eyes might then be more open to see his fathomless grace.

Collect for 6th Sunday of Easter (use it every day):

God our redeemer, you have delivered us from the power of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of your Son: grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life, so by his continual presence in us he may raise us to eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Morning Prayer: Readings and Reflections

For Monday 30th May to Saturday 4th June

Monday 30th May

Numbers 22:1-35

Luke 7:36-50

As we read today's passage it should not be long before we realise an almighty clash is being set up. King Balak is terrified by the size of the Israelite population: they are "too numerous" for him (22:6, mistranslated "too powerful"; see Exodus 1:8). Balak is a new Pharaoh trying to stop Israel finding a home in the Promised Land. He hires rent-a-wizard Balaam saying "Whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed." This is a direct clash with God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:3): "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse, so that all nations will be blessed through you [your descendants]". What is at stake here is this: Can anything stop God's firm commitment to bless and save the world? Answer: No! Military might (Moab) and supernatural power (Balaam) cannot hinder the purposes of God, whose kingdom grows in ways that are strange to the world. If God can make a donkey talk he can certainly grow his kingdom through you!

THY KINGDOM COME: Pray that God will strengthen the persecuted church, so that whatever form the opposition takes, Christians will be blessed to be a blessing.

Tuesday 31st May

Numbers 22:36 – 23:12

Luke 8:1-15

Balaam led the donkey and three times the LORD used the donkey to oppose Balaam's plans. Now Balak leads Balaam and three times the LORD will use Balaam to oppose Balak's plans (23:11, 23:26, 24:13). The God who made the donkey speak now puts words in Balaam's mouth (22:38, 23:5, 12). Yes, Balaam is the donkey in this story! And like a donkey he becomes a beast of burden who must do what his master says, delivering blessings rather than curses. In this first oracle we are told a) the church is a people distinct from the nations (v9): our belonging to God takes priority over national identity; b) God is keeping his promises to grow his church to be as numerous as dust (v10 and see Genesis 13:16): so let us pray for growth; c) people need to identify with the church in life and in death (v10): let us remember that death has become a doorway to a glorious future for God's people!

THY KINGDOM COME: Pray that the church in this country will a) remain loyal to Jesus above all things, b) grow in number, c) proclaim real hope in the face of death.

Wednesday 1st June

Numbers 23:13-26

Luke 8:16-25

Imagine Balak's frustration as every attempt to curse Israel is turned into a blessing! For all his power he is powerless against God's unchanging plan and unbreakable promise. Jesus said "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" and his word is true (Matt. 16:18). Balaam's second oracle uses words that deliberately echo Jacob's blessing of Judah (Genesis 49:9), joining together important statements of prophecy. The oracle reminds us that the God who rescued his people from Egypt will also give his people victory over all enemies. The LORD their God is with them and he is King (v21). If Jesus is with us, no storm can ultimately harm his disciples (Luke 8:25). The church is not a conquering lioness because it uses threat or force. No, Christians triumph over devilish powers "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony". In this way, even martyrdom can be victory (Revelation 12:10-11).

THY KINGDOM COME: Pray for opportunities to speak about King Jesus and his salvation, so that people will look at the church and say "See what God has done!"

Thursday: 2nd June

Numbers 24

Luke 8:26-39

A song in a good musical will draw on earlier themes and give hints of future songs. That's what we find in Balaam's third and fourth oracles. Israel will one day have a great King and an exalted kingdom. This King's life will be patterned on the story of the Exodus. [The description of Israel's story in 23:22-24 becomes a description of Israel's King in 24:8-9a, which should be translated as singular 'he' not plural 'them'.] This King will rise from Judah and he will carry the sceptre promised to Judah's descendant (24:17 and see Genesis 49:9-10). Just as Jacob predicted, the coming King will rule the nations and crush the head of evil (see Genesis 3:15). Does this make you think of someone? Many Christians have linked the star of 24:17 with the star that rose to herald the birth of Judah's King. People become wise when eyes are opened to see Jesus.

THY KINGDOM COME: The coming of Judah's King will change the world. That is happening now! Pray for huge advances of God's Kingdom in oppressive countries.

Friday 3rd June

Numbers 27:12-23

Luke 8:40-56

The Lectionary skips much of the rest of Numbers. If you are able try to read it all, even if you skim-read some of the lists! For a New Testament perspective on Balaam read 2 Peter 2 and Revelation 2. What do they say about him? What modern threats to the church are mentioned? The Balaam story started with Israel camped along the Jordan, opposite Jericho. This is a new generation standing poised to enter the Promised Land. But Moses will not enter, because of his disobedience. Instead the ancient church will follow a man called Jesus, a man full of the Spirit who makes decisions following God's lead. [The name "Joshua" and "Jesus" are exactly the same.] This Jesus will bring them in, like a shepherd leading sheep (27:17) to green pastures. Left to ourselves we will stray like lost sheep. Pray for greater obedience to your Spirit-filled Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

THY KINGDOM COME: People are like "sheep without a shepherd", harassed and helpless, unless Jesus teaches them, or unless faithful teachers proclaim God's Word to them (Mark 6:34, Matthew 9:35-38). So "ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers into his harvest field" who will instruct people with the truth of Christ.

Saturday 4th June

Numbers 32:1-27

Luke 9:1-17

Were the Reubenites and Gadites acting wisely when they asked for this land? On the one hand it was land ready for the taking after kings Sihon and Og unnecessarily attacked the Israelites (21:21-35). On the other, it wasn't land originally promised by God and the tribes of Reuben and Gad would be highly vulnerable to enemy invasions in the centuries that followed. Furthermore: were these two tribes abandoning their fellow Israelites, as Moses suspected, and only shamed into agreeing to support the others, or was their offer (v17-19) always their plan? Whatever we decide, we see the Christian duty to support one another. We don't just "fight the good fight" for ourselves, we are called to help our fellow believers keep following Jesus until the day we together receive our inheritance. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15 and turn those verses into prayer.

THY KINGDOM COME: Pray that God's Kingdom advances in the lives of a) five other church members, b) five other local churches. Pray for them by name.

Collect for "Thy Kingdom Come" (use it every day):

Almighty God, your ascended Son has sent us into the world to preach the good news of your kingdom: inspire us with your Spirit and fill our hearts with the fire of your love, that all who hear your Word may be drawn to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.