

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost



On Holy Ground

ONCE THE LORD JESUS entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday He was in the stronghold of the Jewish political and religious elite: the high priests and the Sanhedrin (council of elders). Chapter 21 of the Gospel of Matthew shows Him challenging them dramatically in word (parables) and action (His attack on the money-changers). One of those parables, the story of the Vinedressers, was a clear indictment of those who abused their position as God's representatives in the vineyard of Israel. And "*when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them*" (v.45).

Matthew does not depict Jesus as explaining this parable; in chapter 23, however, he describes the Lord as using the same image, but with an explanation. "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!*" (v. 37) The fate of the servants was an allusion to the fate of the prophets.

The Father of All the Prophets

Contemporary Jews still reverence the "Tomb of the Prophets" Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi on the west side of the Mount of Olives. Tombs of other prophets are venerated as holy sites in Israel (Hosea and Isaiah), Palestine (Zedekiah) and Iraq (Ezekiel). However the prophet whom Jews call the "Father of all the prophets" and whom our Church remembers this week (September 4) has no tomb. As we read in the Torah: "*So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD. And He buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth Peor; but no one knows his grave to this day*" (Dt 34:5, 6). Some authors have suggested that Moses was buried in an unmarked grave to prevent the still semi-idolatrourous Israelites from making it a shrine or place of worship.

The bulk of the Torah (Exodus through Deuteronomy) is concerned with the story of Moses. It tells how he was born to an Israelite couple in Egypt. The Pharaoh, in an attempt at population control, had ordered that newborn Hebrew boys were to be killed. "*But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the male children alive*" (Ex 1:17).

Exodus tells how Moses fled Egypt after killing a man who was abusing a Hebrew. He settled in Midian (on the northeastern shore of the Red Sea) and married Zipporah, a daughter of the local priest.

While shepherding his father-in-law's flocks, Moses had this life-changing experience:

“And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. Then Moses said, ‘I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn.’

“So when the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’

Then He said, ‘Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. Moreover, He said, ‘I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God” (Ex 3:2-6). Thus Moses is known in our Tradition as “the God-Seer” since he beheld God at the burning bush and when receiving the Law.

Perhaps the most touching image of Moses' relationship with God occurred just before the Israelites leave Sinai for the Promised Land: *“And it came to pass, when Moses entered the tabernacle, that the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the LORD talked with Moses. All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshiped, each man in his tent door. So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend”* (Ex 33:9-11).

When Moses asked God to reveal His divine glory, God replied: *“... I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you... But He said, ‘You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live... you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen”* (Ex 33:19-23).

Moses' vision of God was true, but imperfect. He would become the perfect seer of God on another mountain, Tabor, when he would appear with the prophet Elias at the Transfiguration of Christ.

Moses led the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to freedom. He lived to see the Promised Land before he died, but never got to enter it himself. Moses died on Mount Nebo, near Jericho.

Our Church commemorates the Prophet and God-Seer Moses on September 4, the date on which, according to the Menaion, he had seen the Promised Land.

“A Prophet like Moses”

When the Hebrews were preparing to enter the Promised Land, Moses uttered this prophecy, *“The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear”* (Dt 18:15). After Moses' death, his assistant Joshua assumed the leadership of the Israelites, but this prophecy was not thought to refer to him. While there would be many prophets among God's People in the centuries that followed, none of them would attain the stature of Moses. The Torah concludes with this acknowledgement that the prophecy is not yet fulfilled: *“But since then there has not arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face”* (Dt 34:10).

Christians see that prophecy fulfilled and exceeded in Jesus Christ. He is the ultimate prophet, law-giver and God-Seer who leads His people – not out of Egypt, but out of Hades, delivering us from the power of Death. As we read in the Gospel of John, *“The Law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”* (Jn 1:17).

The Gospel of Matthew is so crafted as to portray Jesus as the New Moses. He deepens our understanding of the Commandments and takes us beyond them (*“You have heard it said... but I say to you...”*). The Beatitudes set out a new way of life, based on self-emptying in imitation of Him.

The very structure of Matthew's Gospel reinforces the idea of Jesus as the New Moses. The story of His ministry is set forth in five sections of teachings and miracles, just as the Torah is made up of five books. Each section ends with a passage such as this: *“And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes”* (Mt 7:28, 29). While this device may mean little to us today, its significance would not have been lost on Matthew's Jewish readers. The Prophet like Moses had come.

“With the divine and righteous Moses, the choir of prophets rejoices today with gladness, seeing their prophecy now fulfilled in our midst. For Your Cross, O Christ our God, by which You redeemed us, shines before all as the end and fulfillment of what they foretold in ancient times. By their intercession, have mercy on us all.”

Kontakion, September 4