

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for the second service – Year A, Easter 7

Contributed by Eric Brown

Lectionary Readings: **2 Samuel 23: 1-5**
 Ephesians 1: 15-23
 Mark 16: 14-20

The seventh Sunday brings the series of “Easter” Lectionary Readings to an end. This coming Sunday lies between Ascension Day and Pentecost

The readings for the second service can be seen as fitting this pattern – conveying the Salvation message of Easter and the Spirit led action of the Early Church after Pentecost. (J.B.Phillips puts a title on his translation of the Acts of the Apostles – “The Young Church in Action”)

In verse 15 of the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus, he writes:

“.....ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people
and, at the beginning of his letter:

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to God’s holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus”

Paul had visited Ephesus on his 2nd Missionary Journey (52AD?). He found there believers who had received nothing more than “John’s Baptism – a baptism for repentance”. They had not even heard of the Holy Spirit. Paul explained Jesus to them; they were baptised in His Name and, when Paul placed hands on them the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke in “tongues” and “prophesied”.

It is now much later and Paul is writing his letter to Ephesus from Rome - from prison.

He gives thanks when he hears of their faith in Jesus and their love for all God’s people – they are holding to the message of Easter, that culmination of Jesus’ time on earth, His “saving” death and His resurrection.

Having given thanks for what they hold in faith, Paul immediately makes his prayer that God would give to the Ephesians the Spirit of wisdom and revelation and the power of the Spirit:

“I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people and his incomparably great power for us who believe.....”

We are between these two great Festivals of the Christian Church – in our readings there is thanksgiving for the Ephesians FAITH and prayer for the outpouring of the HOLY SPIRIT.

Was there any activity of the Holy Spirit prior to the Day of Pentecost?

The passage from 2 Samuel is headed in the NIV translation as “David’s last words”. Among these words (v2) we read:

“The Spirit of the LORD spoke through me; his word was on my tongue.”

There is reference to the “inspired utterance” of:

David son of Jesse,
the man exalted by the Most High,
the man anointed by the God of Jacob,
the hero of Israel’s songs. (David’s Psalms or the praise by the Israelites for his many victories?)

The Spirit of God was exhibited in the life of David as it had been in earlier times through King Saul.

At the end of the reading in verse 5 we read:

“If my house were not right with God, surely he would not have made with me an everlasting covenant, arranged and secured in every part; surely he would not bring to fruition my salvation and grant me my every desire.”

Clearly, in David’s mind “his house was right with God” yet what we read in the Old Testament presents us with a very flawed man. There is one story that fascinates me concerning David.

You will remember that the Israelite army was away in conflict with the Ammonites but David had remained in Jerusalem. One evening he notices Bathsheba bathing on the roof of her house. He sends for her and what follows is in our terminology a “one night stand” with the not unusual consequences!

She is married, but that did not deter David. On being told she is pregnant he recalls her husband - to bring to David a current report on army affairs. He tells Uriah to go home and await a reply to the report – if he goes home and consorts with his wife then the pregnancy can be explained and David will not apparently be involved.

Complication! – Uriah refuses to go home while his army colleagues are beleaguered. When he does return to the army the instruction to the commander is to put Uriah in the “hottest” point of the next battle.

As desired, he is killed in that battle – David is complicit in murder. After the period of mourning David marries Bathsheba.

It is interesting to read David’s reaction when Nathan speaks to David of a rich man, a poor man and a traveller friend of the rich man – how the latter, instead of preparing a meal for his guest using a lamb from his own extensive flocks, took the only lamb of the poor man.

David is incensed, he “burns with anger” and states that the rich man deserves to die.

Nathan then confronts David – “You are that man!”

The thing that fascinates me about the story of David – the child conceived that night dies but David and Bathsheba have another, legitimate, son. His name is Solomon – the “House of David” continues through this couple.

We can read the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1;

14 generations from Abraham to David;

14 generations from David to the Exile;

14 generations from the Exile to Jesus.

In Matthew 1: 5-6 we read:

*“Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.
David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah’s wife*”

In the “Road to Aldersgate” article we read how John Wesley was astounded, Charles shocked, when Peter Bohler asserted that the vilest sinner could be saved in an instant. David was guilty of a dreadful crime but ultimately he was close to his God and assured that “his house was right with God”. There were times when clearly the Spirit of the Lord rested on him.

Reference to the Spirit again, brings us to our Gospel reading.

Most modern translations point out that today’s passage is not found in the earliest texts of Mark’s Gospel. It would appear to be an early, but later, appendage. Jesus commissions his disciples to be evangelists. He speaks of the signs that will accompany those who believe.

How do we react to this list of signs – are some acceptable, others dubious? Speaking in new tongues is experienced in some sections of the Church today (Paul gives many cautions as to the purpose and use of “tongues” –

1 Corinthians). We also readily accept many aspects of a healing ministry;

but, driving out demons? handling snakes?

We know that in New Testament Times illness was often associated with demon possession. We know the medical reasons for many illnesses and given our modern outlook we are uncomfortable with the concept of demons.

Let me ask a question, which I am not going to attempt to answer!

If we are happy to accept that the Holy Spirit can move in unexpected, even spectacular ways, why is it difficult to believe that there are also dark spiritual forces at work around us?

Paul reminded the Ephesians that they were in a fight - they needed the full armour that God could provide:

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

Handling snakes?

A little research on the internet revealed a small number of Appalachian churches in the USA that actively practise snake handling. I was very surprised to read the following:

George Went Hensley is often credited with introducing snake handling practices into the Church of God Holiness, an association of autonomous Christian Methodist congregations!

Between 1955 (when George Hensley died after being bitten by a rattlesnake during a service) and 2015 there have been 14 fatalities resulting from snake bite during a snake handling service. The internet has vague references to some members of these same churches drinking poison – strychnine - but there is no information as to the outcome of that practice!

We are approaching Pentecost – on that eventful day a group of weak, frightened disciples, locked away in an upper room, became a group of powerful Spirit filled evangelists. They acted as the Spirit led and directed.

Let us, as we approach Pentecost, make our prayer the same as that expressed in a song of Chris Bowater:

Holy Spirit, we welcome You.
Holy Spirit, we welcome You.
Move among us with holy fire,
As we lay aside all earthly desires,
Hands reach out and our hearts aspire.
Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit,
Holy Spirit we welcome You.

Holy Spirit, we welcome You.
Holy Spirit, we welcome You.
Let the breeze of Your presence blow,
That your children here might truly know
How to move in the Spirit's flow,
Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit,
Holy Spirit we welcome You.

Holy Spirit, we welcome You.
Holy Spirit, we welcome You.
Please accomplish in me today
Some new work of loving grace, I pray;
Undeservedly have Your way.
Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit,
Holy Spirit we welcome You.