

## Some thoughts on the Old Testament Lectionary Readings for Year A – Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (2<sup>nd</sup> Service)

**Lectionary Readings:** 1 Samuel 21: 1-15  
Psalm 43  
Luke 11: 14-28

Easter is a moveable feast; this year it was celebrated towards the end of the possible date range – that means Ascension Day, Pentecost and Trinity Sunday are also “late” in the calendar.

The Lectionary gives readings for the Sunday between 24 and 28<sup>th</sup> May inclusive. These are the readings for the Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, and are used if Trinity Sunday has been celebrated before this date. This year of course Trinity Sunday was in June and these Ordinary Time readings were not used; this was also the case for the two Sundays that followed. We come to the Sunday between 12 and 18 June; have passed Trinity Sunday and the readings are for the 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Commentators suggest that Psalms 42 and 43 should be read as one. There is no inscription above Psalm 43, sentiments and even verses are in common, for example the final verse of each Psalm and verse 5 of Psalm 42:

*“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?  
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.”*

Psalm 42 commences with those well known words:

*“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God”.*

The author of these Psalms is not named; but Matthew Henry, in his commentary, suggests that they were written by David and further conjectures that they could have been written at a time when David was being persecuted by King Saul and was cut off from sharing publicly in worship. Part of this period in David’s life is contained in the Old Testament reading.

I have been going back through 1 Samuel to refresh my memory on the timeline. You will remember that Moses led Israel in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt; Joshua led them across the Jordan and into the early years of settlement in the Promised Land. There was no obvious successor to Joshua and Israel entered the period of the Judges. 1 Samuel commences with Hannah praying fervently in the House of the Lord and Eli mistakenly assuming she is drunk. Mistake realised she receives a blessing from Eli and later, in fulfilment of the promise she has made to the Lord, on returning to Shiloh she presents her baby, Samuel, to Eli and to the Lord, to serve in His sanctuary.

In chapter 3 we read the familiar story of the call of Samuel, the Lord having rejected the family of Eli. We read on and find the role of Samuel as a prophet of Israel. In chapter 8 there are two significant events recorded. Samuel is old and appoints his sons as Judges over Israel but we read: *“(they) did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice”*. At the same time the people of Israel come to Samuel asking for a king – one of the reasons being the behaviour of his sons. Samuel is not pleased with the request. The Lord is not pleased with the request and through Samuel tells the people all the ills that will befall them if they have a king. The people are not swayed; they want a king in order to be like the surrounding nations.

The Lord instructs Samuel to give them a king – He sets the time, place and circumstance for Saul coming to Samuel. Saul is anointed, Samuel prophesies that the Spirit of the Lord will come on Saul, and this happens shortly afterwards:

*“As Saul turned to leave Samuel, God changed Saul’s heart, and all these signs were fulfilled that day. <sup>10</sup> When he and his servant arrived at Gibeah, a procession of prophets met him; the Spirit of God came powerfully upon him, and he joined in their prophesying. <sup>11</sup> When all those who had formerly known him saw him prophesying with the prophets, they asked each other, ‘What is this that has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?’”*

The 30 year old Saul is crowned, and reigned for 42 years. In chapter 15 we read why the Lord came to reject Saul as king – his not following instructions to the full and possibly trying to make “pious” excuses for the actions of his troops. That brings us to the anointing of David – we remember that Samuel stated his intention of going to Bethlehem in order to offer a sacrifice to the Lord.

I wonder if Saul ever discovered what had happened in Bethlehem? Samuel was certainly fearful for his life if Saul had discovered the true purpose of his journey.

There does appear to be an unexplained break in the timeline of 1 Samuel. We were told that Samuel was old when Israel demanded a king. Saul was king for 42 years – how old then was Samuel when he anointed David?

In chapter 16, verse 13 we read: *“So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power.”* Was it just Jesse’s family who were present when David was anointed or was the anointing more widely known among the leaders of Bethlehem?

In verse 14: *“Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him.”* I suppose today we would explain the ‘evil spirit’ as some form of mental illness. It was suggested that a harpist would soothe Saul at these times – an attendant remembered David, son of Jesse, who was brought to court and became an armour bearer for Saul and harpist whenever the ‘evil spirit’ came on Saul.

In chapter 17 there is the familiar story of David and Goliath. Jesse is old; his three eldest sons are fighting the Philistines and the youngest son David is going backwards and forwards between Saul and his father’s flocks in Bethlehem. Jesse sends David, with provisions, to his eldest sons. We know what follows when David hears Goliath’s challenge. Another discontinuity appears in verse 17. As David goes out to face Goliath, Saul asks his army commander: *“Abner, whose son is that young man?”* He didn’t know or he didn’t remember? In the account of David and Goliath there is no apparent recognition of David by Saul.

At the beginning of chapter 18 we learn that from this moment on Saul keeps David in his court and will not let him go home to Jesse. It is at this point that the strong bond was formed between David and Saul’s son Jonathan. Saul at times shows great love for David but all too frequently there are periods when Saul is again afflicted, times when he even attempts to murder David by pinning him to a wall with a javelin. Jonathan, at first, does not believe his father wishes to kill David but when it becomes clear that this is Saul’s intention; he puts into action a plan he and David have devised to tell David if it is safe to come back to court or to tell him he must flee. The arrows fired and the instructions shouted to the servant for finding them tell David it is not safe – he must flee for his life.

So we come to the passage for today. David first flees to Ahimelech, the High Priest – the Tabernacle at this time being situated in Nob. David is unaccompanied. In his anxiety he is also deceitful, pretending to be on a secret mission for Saul – his men being nearby. He requires food – only the consecrated bread the “Shew” bread was available. Normally this would only have been eaten by the priests but David persuades Ahimelech to part with five of the consecrated loaves. He then enquires about a weapon, and leaves with Goliath’s sword which has been “laid up” in the Tabernacle as a reminder of Israel’s triumph over the Philistines. It would appear that David had no men with him, he was alone and fleeing from Saul. When the latter heard, through a ‘spy’, what had happened at Nob, he sent his men to kill Ahimelech and all the other priests. Was this shedding of blood ultimately David’s responsibility or was he in fact trying to protect the priests by his deception?

We next find David fleeing to the town of Gath – a Philistine town ruled by Achish. He is recognised – isn’t he the one they sing about: *“Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.”* Our reading ends with David, in fear for his life feigning madness – a strategy that clearly works.

So we return to the plea of (David?) the psalmist. Vindicate me, plead my cause, rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? There follows a request to be brought safely to the place of worship where the psalmist will offer praise to God, his joy and his delight.

This brings us to those verses repeated in Psalm 42 and Psalm 43:

*“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?  
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.”*

After this extensive period of “lockdown”, dealing as we are with many unfamiliar situations, do we ever have times when we feel downcast or disturbed within? Perhaps we are trying to see some pattern in what has happened already, or we are looking with uncertainty to the future.

The psalmist says: *“Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.”*

How much more we know of the saving Grace of God, shown to us in Jesus. Like the psalmist our trust is completely in Him, especially at this time, and we come to offer **our** praise.

Fill thou my life, O Lord my God,  
in every part with praise,  
that my whole being may proclaim  
thy being and thy ways.

Fill every part of me with praise;  
let all my being speak  
of thee and of thy love, O Lord,  
Poor though I be and weak.