

Lectionary Readings: 1 Samuel 28: 3-19
Psalm 50: 1-15, (16-23)
Luke 17: 20-37

Over the past few weeks the Old Testament readings have focussed on David and his constant disputes with King Saul – his respect for the ‘holy’ anointing of this first king of the nation. Today we come to the last reading to feature King Saul and, in 2020, it makes very strange reading.

We will remember from the previous weeks that Saul has lost support from the Lord. Samuel, who had anointed Saul as king, had been instructed by the Lord to go to Bethlehem – to anoint the successor king (David). In today’s reading we get a hint at how people in Old Testament times consulted the Lord (verse 6).

“⁵ When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart. ⁶ He enquired of the LORD, but the LORD did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets”.

The Lord did not appear to Saul in a dream. Samuel, the prophet who had been so influential in Saul’s earlier life was dead and we do not read of any ‘replacement’. What was Urim? (To answer that question I am putting my trust in Wikipedia!)

In the [Hebrew Bible](#), the **Urim and the Thummim** ([Hebrew](#): הַאֲוִרִים וְהַתְּמִימִים, [Standard](#) *ha-Urim ve-ha-Thummim* [Tiberian](#) *hā'Ūrīm wəhātTummīm*; meaning uncertain, possibly "Lights and Perfections") are elements of the *hoshen*, the breastplate worn by the [High Priest](#) attached to the [ephod](#). They are connected with [divination](#) in general, and [cleromancy](#) in particular. Most scholars suspect that the phrase refers to a set of two objects used by the high priest to answer a question or reveal the will of God.

The Urim and the Thummim first appear in Exodus 28:30, where they are named for inclusion on the breastplate to be worn by [Aaron](#) in the holy place. Other books, especially [1 Samuel](#), describe their use in divination.

Divination was clearly a common practice - cleromancy involved the rolling of stones or bones; a random event but one where it was believed there could be divine intervention.

All of the ‘normal’ means of seeking the Lord’s presence have failed because the Lord has deserted the king - Saul reverts to a practice which he, himself, has banned!

How do you feel reading this passage; Saul’s encounter with the medium of Endor; the summoning of Samuel from beyond the grave? It does not sit easily with Twenty First Century Christians.

The message Saul receives is not, I am sure, the message he hoped for. He is reminded that the Lord has departed from him; the kingdom has been taken from him and given to David – something which he had, of course, realised for some time. He is reminded why the Lord has departed from him – his not following the instructions of the Lord in the conflict of Israel with the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15). It is in the following chapter (16) that we read of Samuel travelling to Bethlehem and anointing David as king. Finally Saul is told that in the ensuing battle his army will be defeated; he and his sons (Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua) will be killed – *“tomorrow you and your sons will be with me”*.

There are reminders here of the reliance on ‘oracles’ in the ancient world. One of the most famous was the ‘Oracle of Delphi’ in Greece. The answers to specific questions provided by these ‘oracles’ could often be ambiguous.

The historian Herodotus reports that Croesus, the king of Lydia, consulted the ‘Oracle of Delphi’ to know if he should attack the fledgling Persian Empire. The reply received: “he would destroy a great empire if he attacked the Persians”. Little did he realise that the great destroyed empire would be his own - the ‘Oracle’ had given a true answer whichever side was victorious!!

Those words of Samuel to Saul – *“tomorrow you and your sons will be with me”* lead into our New Testament reading.

Remember Luke’s account of the two criminal executed with Jesus on Good Friday – the one who railed at Jesus, who mocked his power and authority; in contrast the one who asked to be remembered when Jesus came into his kingdom.

Jesus replied to the latter: *“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise”*.

Our New Testament reading, also from Luke’s Gospel, is entitled **the coming of the kingdom of God**.

When will this be?

The answer of course is simple and well known – we don’t know! You will remember that there were questions to Jesus that even He was unable to answer – the answers were known to God alone.

In the early Christian Church there was a belief that Jesus would soon return *“in the same way you have seen him go into heaven”* (*Acts 1:11*). Two thousand years later we know this did not happen. Today’s passage is still of relevance for us.

It describes “normal” life but emphasis is on that which is important. At the coming of the kingdom material possessions and attitudes will not be important – remember the parable of Jesus telling of the rich farmer with plentiful crops and nowhere to store them. He planned to pull down his old barns and build new, larger replacements – not knowing that his life would come to an end that night, for him the kingdom of God would have come.

A warning; two will be a bed – one will be taken; two will be grinding corn – one will be taken.

We should be living, ready to give an account of our lives at any moment.

“And O Thy servant, Lord, prepare

A strict account to give!

(Charles Wesley)