

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year A – Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (2nd Service)

Lectionary Readings: **2 Samuel 7: 18-29**
 Psalm 60
 Luke 19: 41 – 20: 8

I would like to have met David – the Biblical accounts describe a person, very remarkable and very complex. He clearly possessed a charismatic character – people were attracted to him.

When Samuel visited Bethlehem, to anoint a king to succeed Saul, we read of David's appearance when called in from tending the flocks – as youngest son, that was almost an afterthought!
He is described as “.....*ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features*”.

David enters Saul's service as a harpist and Saul tells Jesse he wishes to keep David with him – “*I am pleased with him*”.

The two quotations above are both from 1 Samuel. We have previously noted that in the account of David and Goliath, Saul has to ask whose son David is – it is a later passage in 1 Samuel than the one describing David as Saul's harpist so we would assume a later historical event but Saul does not appear to recognise him. We also note at this time that David the youngest son of Jesse, angers his eldest brother (serving in the army) when he speaks with other serving soldiers as Goliath utters his daily challenge. There are reminders here of Joseph and his brothers – the envy easily established within a family, although it is not recorded that David was a ‘favourite’ of his father Jesse.

David becomes a great warrior with numerable victories over the surrounding tribes. David, the accomplished harpist is also a prolific poet as evidenced in the Book of Psalms. Above all, David who possesses many human faults has a supreme confidence and trust in the Lord. Despite his faults the Lord is with him and promises made to David and his ‘House’ endure.

Matthew chapter 1: 17

“Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ.”

Luke 2: 4-7

“⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.”

In the Old Testament passage for today, King David has gone quietly into the presence of the Lord and is considering the promises that have been made to him. Who am I? What is my family? These are his thoughts. He reflects on the Lord's promise re the future of his ‘House’ – all this for a mere human!

In verse 20 David says “*For you know your servant, Sovereign LORD*”. The Lord knew David; the Lord knows each one of us. You may have heard me suggest from the pulpit that there are three “me's”.

There is the ‘me’ I present publicly, the ‘me’ I want everybody to see.

Then there is the ‘truer’ me that I keep to myself – all those things I know about myself but I don't want to share with others.

Finally there is the ‘me’ that even I don't know about – the one that is only known fully to the Lord.

In his poem ‘To a Louse’, Robbie Burns includes the famous line:

“O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us To see oursels as ithers see us!”

We should make it our continual prayer that the Lord shows us what He sees in us; what He desires to change in our lives; and gives us the opportunities and through His Spirit the ability to make such changes.

For two more verses, David marvels at what the Lord has done for him – he reflects on the greatness of the Sovereign Lord. He then turns his attention to Israel:

“And who is like your people Israel – the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for himself, and to make a name for himself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations and their gods from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt? ²⁴ You have established your people Israel as your very own for ever, and you, LORD, have become their God.”

These verses, and others like them, have led some Christian people to take a political stand with regard to the modern Israeli State. We have seen President Trump moving the USA embassy from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem, a point of controversy even in America. At this time when the UK has been challenged to look back at its Colonial Past we might remember the part that we played in establishing a Jewish State within the existing Palestine and the tension and unrest that has ensued throughout the decades.

David returns to the promises made to him and to his House and ends our passage with a statement that the Lord's Covenant is trustworthy and a prayer for blessing on his House, that it may continue for ever in the Lord's sight.

Turning to the Psalm we find it is another of the six Psalms described as a Miktam – this one being attributed to David. The ascription at the top of the Psalm when set against its content seems a little confusing.

“For teaching” – Who and When? – we might ask. This heading seems to refer to a time when David fought Aram Naharaim (NIV footnote – the Arameans of North-West Mesopotamia) and Aram Zobah (NIV footnote – the Arameans of Central Syria). We are not told if these were successful campaigns but the final part of this introduction certainly hints at total victory - Joab striking down twelve thousand Edomites (Syrians) in the Valley of Salt.

The first third of the Psalm does not talk of victory but rather of rejection by the Lord, shown dramatically in the ‘free’ translation that is ‘The Message’:

*“God! you walked off and left us, kicked our defences to bits
And stalked off angry. Come back. Oh please, come back!
You shook earth to the foundations, ripped open huge crevasses.
Heal the breaks! Everything’s coming apart at the seams.”
3-5 You made your people look doom in the face, then gave us cheap wine to drown our troubles.*

In verse 4 David puts his trust, once again, in the Lord.

*“Then you planted a flag to rally your people, an unfurled flag to look to for courage.
Now do something quickly, answer right now, so the one you love best is saved.”*

God then speaks, laying His claim over regions and tribes and David asks four questions:

*“Who will take me to the thick of the fight? Who’ll show me the road to Edom?
You aren’t giving up on us, are you, God? refusing to go out with our troops?”*

The Psalm ends with a request for the Lord’s help and a confident statement of what can be achieved with the help of the Lord:

*11-12 Give us help for the hard task; human help is worthless.
In God we’ll do our very best; he’ll flatten the opposition for good.”*

The Gospel for today brings us to the end of a sequence of readings from Luke over the past weeks.

The first section appears to take place on Palm Sunday. Crowds have spread their cloaks on the road for Jesus to ride over on the unbroken colt that has been brought to Him. Jubilant praise breaks out as they come near the Mount of Olives, much to the disgust and annoyance of local Pharisees - they try to get Jesus to stop the crowd celebrating.

We all know the reply – “If the crowd stops praising then the very stones will cry out”.

Our reading commences immediately after this – as they approach Jerusalem. Jesus sees the city and weeps over it. The only other Gospel reference to Jesus weeping is when he hears of the death of His friend Lazarus and is being taken to the tomb by Mary and Lazarus’s friends.

He is weeping for Jerusalem because He knows the city will be destroyed – O that the inhabitants on that day had even an inkling of the future. In 66CE (AD) groups of Jewish Zealots had seized Jerusalem - unfortunately they often fought among themselves as well as confronting the occupying Roman forces! Four years later the Romans commenced a siege of the city which was to last for four months before the city was taken and the Temple destroyed. During the siege the Romans did construct earth embankments and a wall that encircled the whole city – as foreseen by Jesus as He weeps over Jerusalem.

“They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognise the time of God’s coming to you”.

“God’s coming to you” – at that moment, in the person of Jesus.

The events of the reading are now in “Holy Week”, its significance of course being lost on the citizens of Jerusalem – even on the disciples, although Jesus has been telling them for some time what will happen to Him when they go to Jerusalem.

All the Gospel narratives tell us that after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus spends much time in the Temple precincts – teaching the people. All four Gospels record the incident when Jesus clears the Temple by overturning the tables of the money-changers and the table of those selling doves. In each of the Synoptic Gospels it takes place in “Holy Week” and all three carry the same quotation:

“It is written, ..., ‘My house will be a house of prayer’(Isaiah 56:7); but you have made it a den of robbers”. (Jeremiah 7:11)

(John places this clearing of the Temple early in the ministry of Jesus – immediately after the wedding at Cana.)

A house of prayer; become a den of robbers? An example – devout Jews would have brought their own doves to the Temple for the necessary sacrifice. Those selling doves would find some blemish in these birds and insist that perfect birds be purchased from them. They would of course confiscate the ‘blemished’ birds which a short time later would miraculously be ‘perfect’ for sacrifice!!

As usual we read that the religious authorities sought some way to get rid of Jesus (we know how they finally contrived to get their way at the end of the week) but, as at other times, they were unable to make any move because the crowds flocked to hear Jesus teach – hanging on His every word.

That didn't stop the priests etc trying to catch Jesus out by a question - 'can we trap Him into a blasphemous answer?' There are numerous examples in the Gospels where Jesus is challenged by the authorities or is posed the 'test question' ("Disciples, picking ears of corn when walking through a field on the Sabbath"; "Is it lawful to pay tax to Caesar"; Teacher of the Law - "What must I do to inherit eternal life"; "When will the kingdom of God come?").

The answer that Jesus gives to the question about His authority is typical of many answers He has given previously. He in turn poses a counter question about the baptism John had offered - "was it from heaven, or was it human in origin?" That puts the authorities in a quandary - why did you not support John if you say it was from heaven? - rioting among the people if you say it was a human invention.

I am reminded of the time, recorded in Acts 5 (a dramatic story), when the apostles were arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin .

Gamaliel, a much respected Pharisee advises the Council:

".....leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

The authorities are unable to give Jesus a satisfactory answer; they say they do not know. Jesus therefore declines to give a direct answer to their original question about His authority.

We know the answer of course; the physical life of Jesus reaches its climax a few days later - not understood by many at the time, not understood by the majority today.

It was, and still is, a mystery - a matter of Faith.

As Dora Greenwell expresses it: (H&P 221)

I am not skilled to understand
What God has willed, what God has planned;
I only know at his right hand
Stands one who is my Saviour.

I take God at his word and deed:
Christ died to save me, this I read;
And in my heart I find a need
Of him to be my Saviour.

And was there then no other way
For God to take? I cannot say;
I only bless him, day by day,
Who save me through my Saviour.

That he should leave his place on high
And come for sinners once to die,
You count it strange? So do not I,
Since I have known my Saviour.

And O that he fulfilled may see
The travail of his soul in me,
And with his work contented be,
As I with my dear Saviour!

Yea, living, dying, let me bring
My strength, my solace, from this spring,
That he who lives to be my King
Once died to be my Saviour.

Eric Brown