

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

Lectionary Readings: **1 Kings 10: 1-13**
 Psalm 80: 1-7, (8-19)
 Acts 13: 1-13
 John 6: 24-35

What is the first thing that comes into your mind when you hear or read the words “Queen of Sheba”?

What do you know about “The Queen of Sheba”?

The answer to the first question, for me, is to think and hear “Handel”. Part III of his Oratorio ‘Solomon’ commences with an orchestral ‘Sinfonia’ featuring the two oboes of the orchestra. This piece of music, often played as an orchestral piece, is known as “The arrival of the Queen of Sheba”. In the Oratorio, the subsequent recitative is sung by ‘Nicaule’, Queen of Sheba – the first time she appears in the work.

*From Arabia’s spicy shores,
Bounded by the hoary main,
Sheba’s Queen these seas explores,
To be taught thy heavenly strain.*

Solomon replies: *Thrice welcome Queen! With open arms
Our court receives thee,*

The poetic ‘liberties’ taken in the libretto of ‘Solomon’ provide an answer to the second question.

What do we know about “The Queen of Sheba”? Very little is the answer - some experts doubting if she even existed! Modern historians identify Sheba with the South Arabian kingdom of Saba, in present-day Yemen. Yemen was one of the colonies of ancient Ethiopia which probably accounts for some of the ‘legends’ about “The Queen of Sheba”. These are found in Jewish, Islamic and Ethiopian writing.

Ethiopian tradition has ‘Makade’, the Queen, converting to Judaism when visiting Solomon and returning home pregnant – Menelik, being the son of Solomon and the Queen. A long established ‘ethnic’ African Jewish community, called ‘Beta Israel’, existed in Ethiopia. Following the overthrow of Emperor Haile Sellassie and the formation of successive secular governments, ties with Israel weakened and over 15,000 Beta Israelites emigrated to Israel. At the end of 1994 / beginning of 1995, a secret operation ‘rescued’ a further 8,000 Ethiopian Jews from Sudan – flying them via Brussels to Israel.

Turning to our Bible passage, some sources suggest that “The Queen of Sheba” came to Jerusalem on a trade mission. – We certainly read that she came “with a very great caravan – with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones.” (10:2), but we also read that “she gave the king 120 talents of gold (about 4 metric tonnes), large quantities of spices, and precious stones.” (10:10) If it was initially a trade mission it ended up as a gift!

Matthew Henry, in his commentary suggests that she came “to satisfy her curiosity; for she had heard of his fame, especially for wisdom, and she came to prove him whether he was so great a man as he was reported to be.” In verse 1 we read that “she came to test Solomon with hard questions.” She was obviously impressed by both the wealth and the Wisdom of Solomon – she hadn’t really believed what rumour said about him, but after her visit she was able to say that the things she had seen and the discussions with Solomon delivered more than twice what she had heard!

Verses 11 and 12, in brackets in the NIV, seem to be an extraneous insertion in the main passage about “The Queen of Sheba”. Ships came to Israel carrying gold, almug-wood and precious stones. We read in verse 22 that these ships made a three year round voyage to ‘Ophir’. It is thought that ‘Ophir’ might well have been India; the Almug-wood (or algum-wood) a red sandalwood is found in that country.

I am again taking the risk of copying something found on the internet!!
(godasagardener.com):

“The almug tree yields heavy, fine-grained wood that is notably black on the surfaces yet polishes to a rich ruby or garnet colour. In addition to being strong, it is antiseptic which makes it impervious to most insects, e.g., termites, as no insects will live inside the wood.”

The pillars of the Temple built by Solomon and the musical instruments used in the Temple must have been very impressive.

Verse 13 is an interesting verse.

Solomon has already given the Queen gifts out of his royal bounty. It would appear that as she was departing further gifts, “all she desired or asked for”, were given to her. I wonder what she asked for!

That is it – “The Queen of Sheba” has come and gone.



We do find two references to the events of this OT passage in the New Testament. Jesus has been asked, by some Pharisees and teachers of the law, for a ‘miraculous sign’. Jesus answers them with “The Sign of Jonah”:

*“He answered, ‘A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here. ⁴² The **Queen of the South** will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here.”* (Matthew 12: 39-42; A similar passage is found in Luke 11)

The Lectionary Psalm follows the familiar pattern of:

- Establishing God’s supreme position, then appealing to Him for physical salvation;
- Asking how long the Lord will be angry with His people, making them a mockery among their neighbours;
- Appealing again for salvation;
- Declaring what the Lord did in bringing Israel out of Egypt and settling them in the Promised Land;
- Asking why the Lord has destroyed their stability (“breaking down the walls”);
- A further appeal to the Lord – “Return to us, God Almighty!”;
- A description of their condition – “Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish.”;
- A final appeal for Restoration.

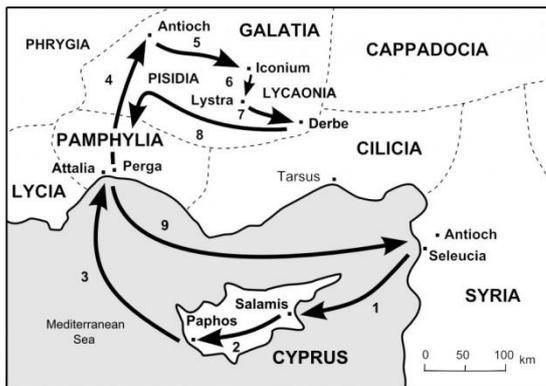
The Psalmist sees the nation’s misfortune as something that has been brought on them by the Lord – not something that has been caused by their own turning away from the Lord (the message delivered by so many of the Prophets).

Mentioning Prophets, we turn to the reading from Acts. At the start of chapter 13 five ‘Prophets and Teachers’ are mentioned:

*“Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene,
Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul”*

While the Church at Antioch were worshipping and fasting they received instructions from the Holy Spirit.

How content are we to say that things don’t work that way today – direct intervention of the Holy Spirit being something that only happened in New Testament times. If we do feel that way, I wonder how much we are blocking the possibility of the Holy Spirit moving in our lives and in the life of our Churches.



The setting aside of Barnabas and Saul marks the start of ‘Paul’s First Missionary Journey’. The transition in the text from Saul to Paul occurs half way through our reading:

v.9: *“Then Saul, who was also called Paul*”

Looking back in Acts we see that after his conversion and a short stay in Damascus (preaching in the local synagogues) Saul escaped from that city, and made his way to Jerusalem where he was treated with great caution. It was Barnabas, a Cypriot Levite convert, who took Saul to the apostles, telling them what had happened on the Damascus road.

Many followers of Jesus had been scattered in the persecution that followed the death of Stephen. Some had ended up in Antioch, preaching to the Jewish community; others took the Gospel message to the resident Greeks – the Church in Antioch was established. It was here the description of a follower as ‘Christian’ was first used. When news of this ‘church’ came to Jerusalem they sent Barnabas to Antioch where he saw the Grace of God at work. In chapter 12 v25 we find Barnabas travelling to Tarsus to locate Saul – bringing him to Antioch where he became one of those teachers mentioned above.

While Saul was in Antioch some prophets came from Jerusalem. Agabus, through the Spirit, predicted a famine throughout the Roman world. A collection was made in Antioch and sent to the elders in Jerusalem, carried by Barnabas and Saul. Returning from Jerusalem they took with them John Mark, a cousin of Barnabas. (Col. 4:10)

Barnabas and Saul were called and commissioned – they set off for Cyprus, accompanied by the young John Mark. When Peter had his dramatic night time deliverance from Prison we remember he went to the house of Mary, where the followers of Jesus were gathered. Mary we read (12.12) was the mother of John, also known as Mark.

John Mark only stayed with them while they were on Cyprus; Barnabas and Paul sailing to Perga from Paphos while John returned to Jerusalem. This incident later became a ‘bone of contention’ between Barnabas and Paul. In chapter 15 Paul suggests to Barnabas that they go back to all the places where they have preached and established churches. Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them but Paul considers that he had “deserted” them when they crossed from Cyprus to Pamphylia. The disagreement is so intense that Barnabas sails for Cyprus with John Mark; Paul choosing Silas as his companion and setting off to visit the churches in Syria and Cilicia. Disagreement, yes, but now there are two missionary teams at work!

The remainder of Acts is concerned with Paul, Barnabas is not mentioned again, but we know that Paul and John Mark were later reconciled. Paul, in prison writing letters to the church at Colossae and to Philemon sends greetings from Mark, who is with him but is not described as a fellow prisoner. In his second letter he asks Timothy to join him quickly and to *“bring Mark with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry”*.

Returning to our passage for today we read of an incident during the time Barnabas and Paul spent in Cyprus. The question was asked earlier as to how we respond to NT accounts of the Holy Spirit acting dramatically. Here we have another example, the confrontation with a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet. We may not be *“full of all kinds of deceit and trickery”* as Elyas was but Paul’s further words are a challenge to us: *“Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?”* It sounds as though this was a constant activity for Elyas; it will not be for us but is there any way in which we hinder the work of the Holy Spirit?

Our Gospel reading commences just after Jesus has fed the five thousand, sent His disciples away across the Lake and retired into the mountain to pray. Later that evening He joins His disciples – walking on the Lake surface to reach them. When the crowd realised that neither Jesus nor His disciples were still there they commandeered some boats from Tiberias which had just landed on the shore where they were gathered and went in search of Jesus. They found Him, but Jesus knew why they had come – because they had seen the miracle of the replication of loaves and the fish but chiefly because they had been fed!

Jesus takes the opportunity to speak to them about food; about bread - the Bread of Life.

After each of the statements Jesus makes, they ask a question:

“What must we do to do the works God requires?”

“What sign will you give us?” –our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness

Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’

³⁴ *‘Sir,’ they said, ‘always give us this bread.’*

³⁵ *Then Jesus declared,*

‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’

I am the bread of life,
He who comes to me shall not hunger,
He who believes in Me shall not thirst.
No one can come to Me
Unless the Father draw him.

*And I will raise him up,
And I will raise him up,
And I will raise him up on the last day.*

The bread that I will give
Is My flesh for the life of the world,
And he who eats of this bread,
He shall live for ever,
He shall live for ever.

Unless you eat
Of the flesh of the Son of man
And drink of His blood,
And drink of His blood,
You shall not have life within you.

I am the resurrection,
I am the life,
He who believes in Me,
Even if he die,
He shall live for ever.

Yes Lord we believe
That You are the Christ,
The Son of God
Who has come
Into the world.

S. Suzanne Toolan