

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

**Lectionary Readings:**   **2 Kings 4: 1-37**  
                                  **Psalm 90: 1-12, (13-17)**  
                                  **Acts 16: 1-15**  
                                  **John 6: 51-58**

This Old Testament passage records two interesting incidents in the ‘ministry’ of Elisha the prophet – one of which challenges us today.

You will remember that Elisha was closely associated with Elijah, staying with him right up to the moment that he was taken into heaven. A promise had been made that if Elisha saw this happen, he would inherit the wish for a “double portion” of Elijah’s spirit. He saw that moment when ‘Elijah was taken away in a whirlwind’, picked up the cloak dropped by the departing prophet and used it to divide the waters of the Jordan – observed by ‘the company of prophets from Jericho’. At that point it was recognised the ‘spirit of Elijah’ now rested on Elisha.

I have sympathy with Elisha as he made his way to Bethel; confronted by a crowd of jeering youths: “Go on up you baldhead!” they chanted. (Do some young males, in a group, ever change? We seem to read daily of groups ignoring all the safety regulations around the covid-19 pandemic.)

At the beginning of 2 Kings 4 we have mention again of the ‘company of prophets’. One of their number has died, leaving his wife destitute; also deep in debt. It is quite possible to ‘revere the Lord’ but to have very little practical ‘nose’.

It reminds me of the modern day saying of “a person so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly use!”

The widow comes to Elisha; her husband’s creditor is threatening to take the two sons as slaves. The prophet asks about her assets – ‘One small jar of olive oil, that is all she has’.

I wonder how we would react if we were given the same instruction as she received. Go round your neighbours and collect as many empty jars as possible don’t ask for just a few! When you’ve collected as many as possible shut your family indoors and start filling the jars from your small jar of oil! Set each one to the side when full.

I like the point when she asks one of her sons for the next empty jar – there are no more, and **at that moment** the flow of oil stops. Through being faithful, trusting the word of Elisha, she has enough to sell, settle her husband’s debts, and to live on in the future.

Do we have the same confidence that “the Lord will provide”? I am reminded of Paul writing to the Philippians:

“And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.”

From time to time in the twentieth and twenty-first Centuries we have heard of ‘churches’ proclaiming a ‘prosperity gospel’, claiming it is securely rooted in Scripture. We note that Paul does not say God will meet all our desires but rather all our needs – some of which we may not realise at the time!

The widow had faith in the word of the ‘Man of God’ – her needs were met; debts paid, the family kept together and the future ensured.

The next section of 2 Kings 4 describes a Shunammite (NIV) woman and her son. I found I was asking the question – Shunammite; was she a “foreign” wife? The answer to the question is no – she came from a small village called Shumen which was part of the original allocation of territory to the Tribe of Issachar.

Elisha, passing through Shunem, is invited to a meal by this prosperous lady. Clearly the hospitality was excellent and it became a regular ‘meal stop’ when Elisha was passing. She recognises the qualities God has placed in Elisha, describing him to her husband as a ‘holy man of God’ – the only time a prophet is awarded this description. She persuades her husband to create a room for the prophet and this clearly comes into regular use. Elisha wanted to reward her and asks what he can do; no answer is given so he asks his servant Gehazi if he knows of any need. The reply – “*She has no son, and her husband is old*”

The result is the prophecy that she will become pregnant and be delivered of a son.

Once again we read of the mysterious and incomprehensible working of God. The child is taken ill and dies; the mother then goes to Elisha for help, first of all saying that everything is well but breaking down in the prophet’s presence. He sends Gehazi to lay his own staff on the dead child’s face, but this has no effect so Elisha went to the boy. The account of the boy’s revival, how Elisha stretched himself out on the dead body, is very reminiscent of the earlier account of Elijah and the son of the widow at Zarepath (1 Kings 17).

This is not the last Biblical reference to the Shunammite woman – it is apparent that Elisha stays in contact with her, for in 2 Kings 8 the prophet gives instructions to take her family away to avoid the seven years famine which the Lord has decreed. On her return she discovers others occupying her house and land and goes to the king to beg for their return. She arrives to find Gehazi, Elisha’s servant, explaining to the king how the prophet had brought her son back to life. Gehazi tells the king, “*This is the woman*”; she is able to add her side of the story – not only is everything restored to her but she also receives income from the land for the years she has been away.

Our Psalm this week, Psalm 90, is described as “a prayer of Moses the man of God”. It is a declaration of God’s relationship with His people – “He has been their dwelling-place throughout all generation”.

These reassuring words of verse 1 are followed by reflections on the transient nature of human life; “returning to dust”; “the new grass of morning, dry and withered by evening”.

Finally “our secret sins” are made clear in the presence of the Lord”. He may have been our dwelling-place” but he is also “Righteous” and we live our imperfect lives with this knowledge.

In verse 12 there is an appeal:

*Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom*

That appeal continues in the remaining verses of the Psalm (13-17; not part of our Lectionary Reading) with a request in each verse until the Psalm comes to an end:

*May the favour of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us – yes, establish the work of our hands.*

It is this Psalm which inspired Isaac Watts to compose his great hymn, frequently sung on “National” occasions – ‘O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come’.

In mentioning this hymn I must comment that I find it very strange to sing verse 6 on ‘Remembrance Sunday’:

‘Time, like an ever rolling stream,  
Bears all its sons away;  
They fly forgotten, as a dream  
Dies at the opening day.’

The reading from Acts records events immediately after the disagreement and separation of Paul and Barnabas – they had been discussing going back to the churches that had been established earlier. The division came over taking John Mark with them. You will remember Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed from Antioch to Cyprus; Paul chose Silas as his travelling companion and returned to Derbe and then on to Lystra (where he had been stoned) and from where he had fled to Derbe. It is in chapter 16 that we find the first reference to Timothy, and is interesting to note that Paul circumcises Timothy before the latter joins Paul and Silas on their ‘missionary journey’. We read this was done because all the Jews living in the area where they were working knew Timothy had a Greek father and a Jewish mother (through whom he could claim his heritage).

There follows one of those wonderful passages that shows how the early Church was guided. It would appear that Paul and his companions have made plans as to where they should travel; they try to enter Bithynia but are prevented from doing so by the Holy Spirit and so they come to the coastal town of Troas.

Paul has his vision of ‘The Man of Macedonia’ and:

*After Paul had seen his vision, **we** got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*

Luke has joined the group accompanying Paul and Silas – the start of the first ‘we’ passage in Acts which continues until the time when Paul and Silas are seized and thrown into prison. Luke does not appear to be with them as they leave Philippi.



I wonder how the Holy Spirit thwarted the human plans to travel into Bithynia? It is clear that the final instruction, to come over to Macedonia – to travel from Asia to Europe - comes in the form of a vision. Paul and his group realise that God is pointing them in that direction.

Have you ever experienced doors shutting, directing you to a different course of action? Would you be ready to respond to the future shutting and opening of doors – directing what you do then and there, possibly changing your whole life?

From Troas, Paul, Silas, Luke and companions set sail for Europe, for Neapolis (the port of Philippi) – spending a night en route at Samothrace, an island in the north-eastern Aegean Sea. Travelling on to the Roman colony they take a few days to settle in before looking for the Jewish community on the Sabbath. It appears there was no synagogue in Philippi so they go out of the city to the river, looking for a place of prayer. It is women they encounter, rather than Jewish men, and among them is Lydia. One writer, commenting on these brief two verses in Acts 16, makes the point that we learn much about Lydia – her name, her origin, her occupation, her domestic situation (*‘her’ household*) and the apparent size of her house (*enough to accommodate Paul and his entourage*). She is clearly a prosperous lady of standing in the city and in the (Church?) It has been suggested that Lydia was just one of her names and she may well have been Euodia or Syntyche, co-workers with Paul and mentioned in his letter to the Philippians.

Our Gospel reading commences at the point it finished a week ago – John 6: 51:

*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.*

The Jews, listening to Him, do not understand the metaphor of bread, flesh etc. They do not realise that He is speaking of His great sacrifice, yet to come, on the cross of Calvary.

Jesus says to them (v.53,54):

*Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. <sup>54</sup>Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.*

He is not speaking of participation in a Communion Service but of accepting Jesus as an in-dwelling Lord and Saviour

*Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.*

*<sup>57</sup>Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.*

And now, O Father, mindful of the love  
That bought us, once for all, on Calvary's tree,  
And having with us Him that pleads above,  
We here present, we here spread forth to Thee  
That only offering perfect in Thine eyes,  
The one true, pure, immortal sacrifice.

Look, Father, look on His anointed face,  
And only look on us as found in Him;  
Look not on our misusings of Thy grace,  
Our prayer so languid, and our faith so dim:  
For lo! between our sins and their reward  
We set the passion of Thy Son our Lord.

And so we come: O draw us to Thy feet,  
Most patient Saviour, who canst love us still;  
And by this food, so awful and so sweet,  
Deliver us from every touch of ill:  
In Thine own service make us glad and free,  
And grant us never more to part with Thee. Amen

William Bright

**Eric Brown**