

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

Lectionary Readings: 2 Kings 6: 24-25; 7: 3-20
Psalm 105: 1-15
Acts 18: 1-16
Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

At the end of the reading from 2 Kings last week we were left with the words – “*So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel’s territory*”.

The peace obviously did not last as today’s reading commences with the very next verse in chapter 6 – under the NIV heading ‘Famine in Besieged Samaria’.

Ben-Hadad, king of Aram has employed all of his army in laying siege to Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The siege was prolonged and conditions within the city became desperate – we read that a donkey’s head was selling for eighty shekels of silver.

The donkey had been declared an unclean animal (Leviticus 11) but the famine in Samaria was so desperate that:

- a. the inhabitants of the city ignored the laws of uncleanness, and
- b. paid a very high price (80 shekels nearly a kilogram of silver!) for the least edible part of the animal.

In the remaining verses of chapter 6 we read that some of the Israelite people have even resorted to cannibalism:

²⁶ *As the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried to him, ‘Help me, my lord the king!’*

²⁷ *The king replied, ‘If the LORD does not help you, where can I get help for you? From the threshing floor? From the winepress?’*

²⁸ *Then he asked her, ‘What’s the matter?’*

She answered, ‘This woman said to me, “Give up your son so that we may eat him today, and tomorrow we’ll eat my son.”²⁹ So we cooked my son and ate him. The next day I said to her, “Give up your son so that we may eat him,” but she had hidden him.’

³⁰ *When the king heard the woman’s words, he tore his robes. As he went along the wall, the people looked, and they saw that, under his robes, he had sackcloth on his body.*

³¹ ***He said, ‘May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if the head of Elisha son of Shaphat remains on his shoulders today!’***

³² *Now Elisha was sitting in his house, and the elders were sitting with him. The king sent a messenger ahead, but before he arrived, Elisha said to the elders, ‘Don’t you see how this murderer is sending someone to cut off my head? Look, when the messenger comes, shut the door and hold it shut against him. Is not the sound of his master’s footsteps behind him?’³³ While he was still talking to them, the messenger came down to him.*

The king said, ‘This disaster is from the LORD. Why should I wait for the LORD any longer?’

7 Elisha replied, ‘Hear the word of the LORD. This is what the LORD says: about this time tomorrow, a seah of the finest flour will sell for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria.’

² ***The officer on whose arm the king was leaning said to the man of God, ‘Look, even if the LORD should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?’***

‘You will see it with your own eyes,’ answered Elisha, ‘but you will not eat any of it!’

The verses which have been printed in bold show three things:

- a. the example of cannibalism,
- b. Joram, the king of Israel’s, mistaken belief that Elisha is behind the city’s misfortune,
- c. Elisha’s prophecy – which links to the end of today’s reading. A seah was a measure of about 7.3 litres. Finest flour would become ‘cheap’, 7.3 litres selling for 11 grams of silver; as would 15 litres of barley.

The reading today, from chapter 7, tells how the Lord caused the Arameans to flee, leaving everything behind in their camp; how the empty camp is discovered by the four lepers; the king’s thought that a trap has been prepared for them if they left the city; the cautious exploration of the situation as suggested by one of his officers; the final realisation that the Arameans have deserted their camp and fled; the plundering of the camp and the price drop for flour and barley as the Lord had said through Elisha.

As he had passed through the city, king Joram had leaned on the arm of one of his officers. This was the man who had questioned the word of Elisha – he was now placed in charge of the gate, where he was trampled by the crowds, fulfilling the prophecy of Elisha (chapter 7: 2 – in bold above).

One siege and famine have ended, a seven year famine of the land is about to happen. We have read to the end of chapter 7 and the next begins with Elisha warning the Shunammite woman, whose son he had restored to life, to go away while the famine lasts (mentioned two weeks ago).

This brings to a conclusion the sequence of readings from 1 and 2 Kings – the OT reading for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time moving on to the Book of Ezekiel.

The psalm this week calls for the people to praise the Lord – remembering all that He has done for them.

He is the Lord our God – remember His covenant for ever:

“the covenant He made with Abraham, the oath He swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant”.

In verse 4 we read good advice to those reading the psalm; good advice for us today:

“Look to the Lord and His strength; seek His face always”

We can almost imagine a three part sermon based on this verse – Look to the Lord; Dwell on His strength; Seek His face always.

Last week we found Paul in Athens – testing his intellectual approach with the Greeks. Today he has left that city and travelled to Corinth, that city where we remember he came with no clever words but resolved to preach only Christ crucified.

Here he linked up with Aquila and Priscilla, Jews who had come to Corinth after expulsion from Rome – ‘pogroms’ are not just historical events of the last two or three hundred years, their antipathies were there millennia earlier and are still present today.

Two things are clear about Paul’s early days in Athens – he went back to his trade as a tentmaker and he declared the Gospel message each week in the synagogue. It was only with the arrival of Silas and Timothy from Macedonia that he turned to full-time preaching.

When the Jews opposed him, and even became abusive, he did something symbolic (it almost has echoes of Pilate washing his hands):

“he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.’”

The Lord blessed the work in Corinth among some of the Jews (including Crispus the synagogue leader) and among the Gentiles.

Guided by the Spirit Paul spent a year and a half teaching the word of God.

The Lord had encouraged him in a vision to ‘keep on speaking, not to be silent for He the Lord was with Paul’.

When Paul was dragged before the Roman authorities they received ‘short shrift’. The proconsul would have taken the complaints seriously if it had involved a ‘crime’; but as it was a Jewish religious dispute he threw their ‘case’ out of court.

If we read the next couple of verses (beyond the Lectionary passage) we see that the Jews bringing the complaint (or the Greeks protesting that complaint) turn on the then current synagogue leader, Sosthenes, and beat him in front of proconsul Gallio who we read *“showed no concern whatever”*.

The NIV ‘Study Bible’ notes that Paul writing his first letter to the church in Corinth opens with a greeting:

*“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,
To the church of God in Corinth ……”*

Was this the same Sosthenes? Was he the second leader of the synagogue to be influenced by Paul’s preaching – to become a Christian?

After this clash with the Jews we find Paul spending more time in Corinth before eventually sailing for Syria accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila who travelled with him as far as Ephesus.

For the last three weeks the Gospel reading has come from John chapter 6 with its focus on ‘Jesus the Bread of Life’.

This week we move to a completely different topic and to a different Gospel. In Corinth, Paul contested with the Jews – the Gospel versus the Law; in Mark’s Gospel the Pharisees and the teachers of the law are contesting with Jesus over practices. His disciples have not observed all of the regulations concerning ritual cleaning before eating; they are eating with ‘defiled’ hands.

Jesus makes it clear that a person cannot be defiled by what goes into them – ‘defiled’ hands do not mean ‘defiled’ food, but His statement to the crowd covers more than food regulations:

“Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵ Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.’”

What is at the ‘heart’ of a person’s belief? At the heart of their very personality? What do they present to others around them? For us today, as followers of Jesus, it is not going to be legalistic food regulations associated with our religion but I wonder if we have equivalent ‘hang-ups’?

Are there other things “that come out of us” which should be treated in the same way as those food regulations were in the time of Jesus? Do things such as emphasis on our traditions restrict our growth; even restrict the work of the Holy Spirit?

Jesus creates a list of what may be in a person’s ‘heart’:

“evil thoughts – sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.”

These are extremes I hear you say – yes they are and we say definitely no to some such as murder. Are there any, however, that may have some slight influence on who we are?

Hopefully we can prayerfully examine this list and more, asking the Holy Spirit to reveal our faults and aid us as we strive to remove them from our lives.

Just as I am, without one plea
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am, and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot,
To Thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fighting and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind:
Sight, riches, healing of the mind,
Yea, all I need, in Thee to find,
O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am, Thou wilt receive,
Wilt welcome, pardon
Because Thy promise I believe
O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am – Thy love unknown
Has broken every barrier down -
Now to be Thine, yea, Thine alone,
O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am, of that free love
The breadth, length, depth, and height to prove,
Here for a season, then above,
O Lamb of God, I come!

Charlotte Elliott

Eric Brown