

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

Lectionary Readings: Ezekiel 20: 1-8, 33-44
Psalm 119: 41-48, (49-64)
Acts 20: 17-38
Mark 8: 27-38

Some elders of Israel have come to Ezekiel to ‘enquire of the Lord’. It is about 11 months since they last came with a similar request (chapter 14):

Some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat down in front of me. ²Then the word of the LORD came to me: ³‘Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling-blocks before their faces. Should I let them enquire of me at all? ⁴Therefore speak to them and tell them, “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: when any of the Israelites set up idols in their hearts and put a wicked stumbling-block before their faces and then go to a prophet, I the LORD will answer them myself in keeping with their great idolatry. ⁵I will do this to recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.”

⁶‘Therefore say to the people of Israel, “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!

At the beginning of chapter 20 there is a specific time reference – “*In the seventh year, in the fifth month on the tenth day....*”. Various sources place this event as in July/August or specifically August 9th or 14th 591 BC.

The message to the elders indicates that the Lord will not let them ‘enquire of Him’ but Ezekiel is free to bring charges against the people of Israel.

One Commentary has divided the text of Ezekiel into sections:

The Defective Leadership of Israel (20: 1 – 23: 49)
The history of Israel’s rebellion and the Lord’s grace (20: 1-44)
Rebellion in Egypt (20: 1-9)
Rebellion in the wilderness (20: 10-26)
Rebellion in the conquest and settlement of the land (20: 27-29)
Rebellion of Judah in Ezekiel’s day (20: 30-44)

Last week I mentioned that Blandford are conducting a six week ‘Zoom’ study, based on Tom Stuckey’s book “Methodism Unfinished” which is based on the reflections of ten Methodists – largely responding to Tom’s earlier book “Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land”. (*The Future of the Church in Britain A Methodist Perspective*)

The underlying theme encountered so far is ‘How do we minister/witness in a “strange” land – in “Babylon”’? Are we staying true to our calling or are we, like the Israelites, being attracted and ‘defiled’ by the world around us?

In the section of chapter 20 not included in the Lectionary Passage (verses 9-32) we twice read of the ‘**wrath of God**’.

¹³“Yet the people of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness. They did not follow my decrees but rejected my laws – by which the person who obeys them will live – and they utterly desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and destroy them in the wilderness. ¹⁴But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out.

²¹“But the children rebelled against me: they did not follow my decrees, they were not careful to keep my laws, of which I said, ‘The person who obeys them will live by them,’ and they desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in the wilderness. ²²But I withheld my hand, and for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out.

I remember a Vicar in Croydon who would not permit the worship group at his church to sing the, now, very popular Townend/Getty song – “In Christ alone”. He objected to lines in verse 2:

“.... Till on that cross as Jesus died,
the **wrath of God** was satisfied”

There is an internet item, dated September 2014, which reports that “The (USA) Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song” wanted to substitute “the love of God was magnified” for “the wrath of God was satisfied”. When Stuart Townend and Keith Getty objected; the hymn was dropped by the Committee, not without incurring some criticism:

“Critics say the proposed change was sparked by liberals wanting to take God’s wrath out of the hymnal. The committee says there’s plenty of wrath in the new hymnal. Instead, the problem is the word “satisfied,” which the committee says refers to a specific view of theology that it rejects.”

When, in our Lectionary reading, we return to chapter 20 at verse 33 we read that the Lord is not letting go of Israel – He declares His Sovereignty and His promise:

⁴¹ I will accept you as fragrant incense when I bring you out from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will be proved holy through you in the sight of the nations. ⁴² Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I bring you into the land of Israel, the land I had sworn with uplifted hand to give to your ancestors. ⁴³ There you will remember your conduct and all the actions by which you have defiled yourselves, and you will loathe yourselves for all the evil you have done. ⁴⁴ You will know that I am the LORD, when I deal with you for my name's sake and not according to your evil ways and your corrupt practices, you people of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

We are probably aware that Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm, indeed the longest “chapter” in the Bible. The headings for each section are letters of the Hebrew alphabet – the Psalm being an acrostic with each section not only headed by the successive letter of the alphabet but the text in that section also commencing with that letter. This was an ‘aide memoir’ for learning the text! (I am glad that Local Preachers are not expected to have memorised each one of the Psalms – just as glad that I am not expected to play symphonic parts from memory!! I add that comment after watching a ‘Prom’ the other night when the Aurora Orchestra concluded their concert with a performance of Beethoven Symphony No. 7 from memory – some feat.)

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|--------------------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| <i>Cheth</i> | <i>Zain</i> | <i>Vau</i> | <i>He</i> | <i>Daletb</i> | <i>Gimel</i> | <i>Beth</i> | <i>Aleph</i> |
| ח | ז | ו | ה | ד | ג | ב | א |
| <i>Ain</i> | <i>Samech</i> | <i>Nun</i> | <i>Mem</i> | <i>Lamed</i> | <i>Caph</i> | <i>Yod</i> | <i>Teth</i> |
| ע | ס | נ | מ | ל | כ | י | ט |
| <i>Point</i> | <i>Tau</i> | <i>Shin</i> | <i>Resh</i> | <i>Koph</i> | <i>Tzade</i> | <i>Pe</i> | |
| ⋄ | ת | ש | ר | ק | צ | פ | |
| <i>Extended forms of</i> | | | | | | | |
| <i>Tau</i> | <i>Mem</i> | <i>Lamed</i> | <i>He</i> | <i>Aleph</i> | | | |
| ת | ם | ל | ה | א | | | |

Our reading from verses 41 to 48 cover the sixth letter and verses 49-64 (in brackets) the seventh and eighth letters of the alphabet – remember Hebrew text reads right to left; and note the occasional alternative ‘name’ for the letter in the table above. The text of the Psalm is a real contrast to the situation described in Ezekiel where the Lord castigates Israel for ‘deserting’ Him; the psalmist showing absolute devotion to the Lord and to the teaching of His law:

- ⁴¹ May **your unfailing love** come to me, LORD,
your salvation, according to **your promise**;
- ⁴² then I can answer anyone who taunts me,
for **I trust in your word**.
- ⁴³ Never take **your word of truth** from my mouth,
for **I have put my hope in your laws**.
- ⁴⁴ **I will always obey your law**,
for ever and ever.
- ⁴⁵ I will walk about in freedom,
for **I have sought out your precepts**.
- ⁴⁶ I will speak of your statutes before kings
and will not be put to shame,
- ⁴⁷ for **I delight in your commands**
because I love them.
- ⁴⁸ **I reach out for your commands**, which I love,
that I may **meditate on your decrees**.

Verses 49-64 remind us that rooted as we are in the Lord, the path ahead is not always easy or straightforward – we may be mocked for our beliefs (verse 51) or even physically abused (verse 61) but confidence is there that the Lord is with us. These two sections of the Psalm are a mixture of confidence in the Lord, personal requests to Him and praise. They are an example to us today – confidence in His promises; confidence that He will be there in adversity; a comfort in knowing His will and purpose for our lives.

Knowing His will and purpose for our lives – Paul certainly knew what they were for him, and there were not ‘pleasant’ prospects. He has spent a long time with the Church in Ephesus and it is their leaders who are summoned to Miletus for him to say his farewells. Why did he know it was farewell?

²² ‘And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. ²³ I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. ²⁴ However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.

²⁵ ‘Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.

Do we ever feel “compelled by the Spirit”? - are there times when the actions we try to take based on what we think we ‘ought’ to be doing are completely thwarted and we are led in a different direction? We remember the words used annually in the Covenant Service:

*“I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what You will, rank me with whom You will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering;
let me be employed for You or laid aside for You,
exalted for You or brought low for You;
let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing;
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to Your pleasure and disposal.”*

May our prayer be that we are given the strength and inspiration to daily live this Covenant not just to repeat the words once a year.

Paul offered a parting prayer to the Ephesian elders, a prayer which can also be true for us today:

Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

There is very little to say about the Gospel reading appointed for the second service on this Sunday. It has been the morning, principal service reading, in recent weeks – indeed it was covered over two weeks with Peter’s declaration that Jesus is the Messiah in week 1 and his outburst when Jesus begins to foretell His future in week 2.

“Peter declaring that Jesus is the Messiah” (verses 27-30) and “Jesus predicts His death” (verses 31-33) lead us to the third section of our reading – **“The way of the cross”**. The language; ‘taking up the cross’ may be extreme but it takes us back to the first line of our Covenant – *“I am no longer my own but yours.”*

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.’

In the Cross of Christ I glory:
Towering o’er the wrecks of time,
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.

When the woes of life o’ertake me,
Hopes deceive, and fears annoy,
Never shall the Cross forsake me:
Lo! It glows with peace and joy.

When the sun of bliss is beaming
Light and love upon my way:
From the Cross the radiance streaming
Adds more lustre to the day.

Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,
By the Cross are sanctified;
Peace is there that knows no measure,
Joys that through all time abide.

In the Cross of Christ I glory:
Towering o’er the wrecks of time,
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.

John Bowring

“Take up thy cross” the Saviour said,
“If thou wouldst my disciple be:
Deny thyself, the world forsake,
And humbly follow after me.”

Take up thy cross; let not its weight
Fill thy weak spirit with alarm;
His strength shall bear thy spirit up,
And brace thy heart and nerve thine arm.

Take up thy cross, nor heed the shame:
Nor let thy foolish pride rebel;
Thy Lord for thee the cross endured,
To save thy soul from death and hell.

Take up thy cross and follow Christ;
Nor think till death to lay it down;
For only he who bears the cross
May hope to wear the glorious crown.

Charles W. Everest (USA Methodist Hymnal 260)

Eric Brown