

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

Lectionary Readings: Ezekiel 33: 23, 30-34: 10
Psalm 119: (113-120), 121-128, (129-136)
Acts 26: 1, 9-25
Mark 9: 30-37

Once again our OT reading comes from Ezekiel – a well established member of the Jewish community living in exile in Babylon. In chapter 1 we read that Ezekiel was a priest who received a revelation from the Lord:

In my thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the River Kebar, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

²On the fifth of the month – it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin – ³the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the River Kebar in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the LORD was on him.

Throughout the book that bears his name, Ezekiel received specific prophecies – each to fit the circumstances of the time. In turning to chapter 33, verse 23 we miss the event ‘triggering’ the “Word of the Lord coming again to Ezekiel”:

Jerusalem’s fall explained

²¹In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month on the fifth day, a man who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, ‘The city has fallen!’ ²²Now the evening before the man arrived, the hand of the LORD was on me, and he opened my mouth before the man came to me in the morning. So my mouth was opened and I was no longer silent.

In verses 24-29 the Lord speaks, through Ezekiel, about the ‘remnant’ left in the ruined Jerusalem – how they are clinging to the promised land as ‘Sons of Abraham’ but at the same time living impure lives – eating meat containing blood, shedding blood before idols, living by the sword, doing ‘detestable’ things, behaving immorally.

The Lord asks “Should they possess the land?” He then goes on to foretell disaster for those who remain in Jerusalem.

We pick up today’s reading in verse 30 of chapter 33 and there we find three ‘interesting’ verses. It is clear that the exiles recognise Ezekiel as a ‘Man of God’:

³⁰ ‘As for you, son of man, your people are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, “Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD.”

³¹ My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to hear your words

“Come and hear the message that has come from the Lord”; they come to Ezekiel and listen to what he has to say, then:

..... **they do not put them into practice.** Their mouths speak of love, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. ³² Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.

³³ ‘When all this comes true – and it surely will – then they will know that a prophet has been among them.’

“When all this comes true” – includes the prophecy concerning the remnant in Jerusalem.

The Word of the Lord comes again to Ezekiel and his prophecy is against the leaders of the Jewish community – ‘the Shepherds’ - from the political to the religious.

They are accused of looking after their own interests and not those of the ‘flock’ – indeed they make use of the latter for their own purposes, eating the curds, clothing themselves from the wool collected and finally slaughtering the choice animals for food.

The Lord reminds them that they have not looked after the weak and feeble (is there a salutary reminder to us in these unusual and difficult days?); they have not gone out searching for the strays and the lost. The Lord says to the ‘shepherds’, says to ‘the leaders’:

You have ruled them harshly and brutally. ⁵ So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶ **My sheep** wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and **no one searched or looked for them.**

They are the Lord’s sheep and it is expected that the ‘leadership’ will have responsibility for them – are these words we should be hearing today?

We have, as a complete contrast and example, the parable told by Jesus and recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke:

¹² ‘What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.

¹⁴ In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

Returning to Ezekiel – the Lord promises to hold the ‘shepherds’ to account and affirms that the ‘flock’ are His:

..... ⁹ therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD:

¹⁰ this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock.

I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves.

I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

As we are challenged by those words of Ezekiel spoken to the ‘leaders’ of exiled Israel?

We remember, and share in, words of Charles Wesley in his hymn “A charge to keep I have”:

Arm me with jealous care,
As in Thy sight to live;
And O Thy servant, Lord, prepare
A strict account to give!

The Lord holds the ‘shepherds’ accountable for the flock; may the account we give show that we have been faithful to our calling.

The Psalm appointed for this second service is again part of Psalm 119 – three sections headed by the 15th-17th letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

It is the middle section that is not given brackets in the Lectionary and in this section the Psalmist is initially making requests of the Lord. The last of these are found in verses 125 and 126:

¹²⁵ I am your servant; give me discernment that I may understand your statutes.

¹²⁶ It is time for you to act, LORD; your law is being broken.

The request for discernment – that we might know ‘God’s Will’ for each of us is as relevant today as it was for the Psalmist. We too live in an age, a world, where the Lord’s law is ignored or wilfully broken; a world where it may not even be known. It is time for the Lord to act again - have we ever considered that His course of action might be through us?

The preceding and following sections once again show the psalmist’s confidence in the Lord and his love for the ‘Law of the Lord’. One or two lines stand out and can be ‘food for thought’:

¹¹⁶ Sustain me, my God, according to your promise, and I shall live; do not let my hopes be dashed.

¹¹⁷ Uphold me, and I shall be delivered; I shall always have regard for your decrees.

¹³³ Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me.

Paul, in Jerusalem, has been arrested and as usual he faces charges brought by the Jewish Leaders to the Roman Authorities. We remember Paul’s words to the leaders of the Church in Ephesus that were part of our reading last week:

‘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.

In Acts 21 we read how some Jews from the province of Asia recognise Paul in the Temple and stir up a riot. They drag him out of the Temple and he is rescued (arrested) by a contingent of Roman Troops whose commander could not work out what was going on but thought Paul was an Egyptian revolutionary! This misapprehension is resolved when Paul speaks to him in Greek and is given permission to speak to the crowd. He gives his testimony including among his sins, support at the time for the stoning of Stephen.

It is only when he declares that the Lord said to him “Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles” that the riot breaks out again and Paul is taken into the barracks.

To find the reason for the ‘rioting’ the commander orders him to be flogged. I love those moments when Paul uses his worldly status to further the Lord’s work:

²⁵ As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, ‘Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been found guilty?’

²⁶ When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. ‘What are you going to do?’ he asked. ‘This man is a Roman citizen.’

²⁷ The commander went to Paul and asked, ‘Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?’ ‘Yes, I am,’ he answered.

²⁸ Then the commander said, ‘I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship.’ ‘But I was born a citizen,’ Paul replied.

²⁹ Those who were about to interrogate him withdrew immediately.

The commander himself was alarmed when he realised that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains.

The commander releases Paul but arranges for him to appear before the Sanhedrin. Again Paul plays his ‘trump’ card and causes division in the Sanhedrin between the Pharisees (of which he was one) and the Sadducees. Because of the violence shown towards him he is again taken into the “safety” of the barracks where, the following night, Paul “sees” the Lord:

The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.’

The commander having been informed of a Jewish plot to assassinate Paul arranges his transfer under guard (200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen!) to Governor Felix in Caesarea. The accusations from the Jewish leaders continue and Paul remains for his safety in a form of house arrest which lasts until Felix is replaced (two years later) by Festus. The latter refuses to send Paul back to Jerusalem but invites the Jewish leaders to come to Caesarea with their accusations – so we come to the famous trial before Festus:

After spending eight or ten days with them (*the Jewish leaders*), Festus went down to Caesarea. The next day he convened the court and ordered that Paul be brought before him. ⁷When Paul came in, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood round him. They brought many serious charges against him, but they could not prove them.

⁸Then Paul made his defence: 'I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar.'

⁹Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favour, said to Paul, 'Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?'

¹⁰Paul answered: 'I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. ¹¹If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them.

I appeal to Caesar!

¹²After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: **'You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!'**

Festus needs to write some covering letter when sending Paul to Caesar so he takes the opportunity of discussing the case with King Agrippa II, when the latter pays a courtesy call on the Roman Governor. Agrippa expresses an interest in hearing Paul put his case and Paul is pleased to be given this opportunity:

Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'You have permission to speak for yourself.'

So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defence:

²'King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defence against all the accusations of the Jews, ³and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies.

Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.

⁴'The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. ⁵They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee. ⁶And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. ⁷This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me. ⁸Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?

Paul once again gives his testimony and at the end of our reading, today, Festus declares he is out of his mind. If we read on a few verses we see that Festus and Agrippa find nothing "criminal" in Paul, but he has appealed to Caesar – remember the Lord's word to Paul - "As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome".

²⁴At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defence. 'You are out of your mind, Paul!' he shouted. 'Your great learning is driving you insane.'

²⁵'I am not insane, most excellent Festus,' Paul replied. 'What I am saying is true and reasonable.'

²⁶The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner.

²⁷King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.'

²⁸**Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?'**

²⁹**Paul replied, 'Short time or long – I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.'**

³⁰The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them.

³¹After they left the room, they began saying to one another, 'This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment.'

³²Agrippa said to Festus, 'This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.'

The book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome, living by himself with a soldier to guard him. Once again he takes the Gospel message to the Roman Jews (or rather they come to him to hear the message). We have no account of his appearance before Caesar and the concluding words are:

For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him.

³¹**He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ – with all boldness and without hindrance!**

The Gospel reading for this service is entitled "***Jesus predicts his death a second time***". We remember Peter's outburst when Jesus tried to explain to the disciples for the first time that he was going to be killed but would rise three days later. There is no outburst this time; we are simply told they did not understand what He said and that they were afraid to ask Him about it. It is probably only after the resurrection that understanding begins to 'dawn' on the disciples.

They reach Capernaum and are resting in a house when Jesus asks what they have been arguing about during the journey. There must have been embarrassment as they keep quiet, they don't want to let on they have been arguing over who among them was the greatest! But Jesus already knows what it was – His reply, demonstrated throughout His life:

'Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.'

From heaven you came, helpless babe,
entered our world, your glory veiled,
not to be served but to serve,
and give your life that we might live.
*This is our God, the Servant King,
He calls us now to follow Him,
to bring our lives as a daily offering
of worship to the Servant King.*

So let us learn how to serve
and in our lives enthrone Him,
each other's needs to prefer,
For it is Christ we're serving.
*This is our God, the Servant King,
He calls us now to follow Him,
to bring our lives as a daily offering
of worship to the Servant King.*