

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

Lectionary Readings: Proverbs 2: 1-11
Psalm 136: 1-9, (10-26)
1 John 2: 1-17
Mark 10: 2-16

If is one of the shortest words in the English language, yet it is the theme of Rudyard Kipling's best known poem:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream - and not make dreams your master;
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
' Or walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch,
if neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
**Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!**

(The third stanza of the poem has been omitted - its emphasis on losing all in a 'game of chance' did not appear to be appropriate!)

The writer of Proverbs, similarly makes a number of 'If' statements. He has the Lord saying "My Son" and then goes on (verses 1-5 have been amplified):

If you accept my words
If you store up my commands within you
If you turn your ear to wisdom
If you apply your heart to understanding
If you call out for insight
If you cry aloud for understanding
If you look for insight and understanding as for silver
If you search for it as for hidden treasure

**Then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.**

The word 'If' implies choice, we can go one way or we can go another. It is only by making the choices listed above that we "will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God." This passage from Proverbs goes on to tell us the consequences and benefits of making the right choice:

⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

⁷ He holds success in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose way of life is blameless,

⁸ for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones.

⁹ Then you will understand what is right and just and fair – every good path.

¹⁰ For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.

¹¹ Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you.

Taking words of Matthias Claudius out of their 'seasonal setting of harvest':

"All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above; then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all His love."

Psalm 136 is a well known Psalm that lends itself to antiphonal reading, the response being “*His love endures for ever*”. Verses 1-3 Give thanks: “*to the Lord, for He is good*”; “*to the God of gods*”; “*to the Lord of Lords*”; verses 4-9 describe His action in creation – the heavens, the earth, the waters, the sun and the moon.

Verses 10-26 are in brackets which mean they may be omitted from the Lectionary Reading. Verses 10-22 remember specific actions of the Lord on behalf of His people and the final 4 verses return to a more general remembrance of things done for the Israelites – remembering our low estate, freeing us from our enemies, giving food to every creature – which leads to our offering thanks to the Lord.

If we look at the “Index of Biblical Texts” in Hymns and Psalms we find two hymns that are based on this Psalm and display the antiphonal nature of the Psalm.

John Milton writes the well known hymn (H&P 27):

Let us with a gladsome mind (verse)
Praise the Lord, for he is kind:
 For His mercies aye endure, (refrain)
 Ever faithful, ever sure.

Henry Williams Baker writes the equally well-known hymn, with a seasonal flavour (H&P 359):

Praise, O praise our God and King!
Hymns of adoration sing:
 For His mercies still endure,
 Ever faithful, ever sure.

Isaac Watts produced a hymn (H&P 22) based on the Psalm without an obvious single refrain, there are several:

Give to our God immortal praise, Mercy and truth are all His ways: Wonders of grace to God belong, Repeat His mercies in your song.	He fills the sun with morning light, He bids the moon direct the night: His mercies ever shall endure, When sun and moon shall shine no more.
Give to the Lord of lords renown; The King of kings with glory crown: His mercies ever shall endure, When lords and kings are known no more.	He sent His Son with power to save From guilt and darkness and the grave: Wonders of grace to God belong, Repeat His mercies in your song.
He built the earth, He spread the sky, And fixed the starry lights on high: Wonders of grace to God belong, Repeat his mercies in your song.	Through this vain world he guides our feet, And leads us to His heavenly seat: His mercies ever shall endure, When this vain world shall be no more.

Reference to the ‘Biblical Index’ in Singing the Faith shows several of the ‘modern’ songs/hymns, based on Psalm 136, that have been included. Among these is a well known song (STF 66) by Edith McNeil:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
His mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning,
New every morning,
Great is Thy faithfulness, O Lord,
Great is Thy faithfulness.

Chris Tomlin has written a ‘hymn’ with the instruction that “*the lines of the verse may be alternated by a cantor and the congregation*”. In this, it echoes the form of the original Psalm, which is also found in the Canticles and Psalms section of STF at number 834 (using “The New Revised Standard” Translation). Chris Tomlin writes:

Give thanks to the Lord, our God and King: His love endures forever. For He is good, He is above all things. His love endures forever. Sing praise, sing praise.	From the rising to the setting sun, His love endures forever. By the grace of God, we will carry on, His love endures forever. Sing praise, sing praise. Sing praise, sing praise.
With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm His love endures forever. For the life that’s been reborn, His love endures forever. Sing praise, sing praise. Sing praise, sing praise.	<i>Forever God is faithful ...</i>
<i>Forever God is faithful, Forever God is strong, Forever God is with us, Forever. Forever God is faithful, Forever God is strong, Forever God is with us, Forever. Forever.</i>	

For the second week we share verses from the First Letter of John, which was written to no particular Church and leads to the conclusion that it was a ‘circular’ letter to believers in general.

Last week we read from chapter 2, verses 22- 29; this week we return to the beginning of the same chapter where we read very familiar words - Words of great assurance that were, for those of more mature years, part of each Holy Communion celebration based on the “Book of Offices”.

All standing, the Minister would offer ‘comfortable’ words of Jesus to all that truly turned to Him, followed by a verse from Paul’s First Letter to Timothy. Then followed words of St. John:

“If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and He is the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 2: 1-2) (KJV)

It is worth turning back to chapter 1: (NRSV)

The Word of Life

1 We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— **2** this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— **3** we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. **4** We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

God Is Light

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. **6** If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; **7** but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

After the opening verses of chapter 2, John goes on to give instruction for ‘normal’ living:

1. We should keep His commands – *“whoever claims to live in Him must live as Jesus did”*.
2. We must show “Love for brother and sister”:

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister^[a] is still in the darkness. **10** Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. **11** But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.

Footnotes

¹ John 2:9 The Greek word for *brother or sister (adelphos)* refers here to a believer, whether man or woman, as part of God’s family;

John tells his readers that he is writing to ‘the children’ because their sins have been forgiven and they know the Father.

He is writing to the ‘fathers’ because they know ‘Him who is from the beginning’.

He is writing to the young men because they have overcome the ‘Devil’; they are strong and the word of God lives in them..

The final three verses of our passage continue the theme of living in Jesus, not in ‘the World’; giving each one of us today the same warning and promise that it did to the believers being addressed directly by John.

15 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father^[a] is not in them.

16 For everything in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world.

17 The world and its desires pass away, but **whoever does the will of God lives for ever.**

The Gospel passage from Mark throws us into the centre of a current debate going on in the Church and that has occupied us over the past two years within the British Methodist Connexion.

We live in a society where we often here such phrases as ‘politically correct’ or ‘all inclusive’. By an Act of Parliament the very definition of ‘marriage’, which had been in place for centuries, was changed at the stroke of a pen, the moment the Act became Law.

The question we must ask ourselves concerning this passage from Mark, and similar passages of the Bible, put simply is – ‘Are Biblical Passages relevant in Twenty First Century Britain, or should our ‘Christian’ views change and reflect those of society in general?’

Looking back, we see those words of St John:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them.

16 For everything in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world.

Do they throw light on the teaching of Jesus as recorded by Mark?

In the United States, today, we see a much ‘polarised’ society. Those who claim to stand on Biblical Standards are described as ‘right wing’ – their views collectively emphasising gender, abortion and race relations. Their opponents are described as ‘secular’, ‘liberal’ and even as ‘socialist’. How they differ from us – Those in the US with the most ‘left wing’ views would probably be seen in the UK as moderate ‘Conservatives’!

Jesus teaches about marriage and divorce; is His teaching still relevant? Did you, did I become involved in the discussion within our Church that Conference put in place in ‘The Interim Report on Marriage and Relationships’?

(The 2019 Conference **voted** by 247 **votes** to 48 to endorse a report, God in Love Unites Us, by the **Marriage and Relationships Task Group**. It proposes allowing same-sex couples to **marry in Methodist churches**, and providing resources and liturgies to celebrate civil partnerships. The final vote on this report was due at the 2020 Conference but did not appear to take place at the ‘on-line’ Conference.)

I wonder if this majority truly reflects the feeling in the ‘pews’?

Thou God of truth and love,
We seek Thy perfect way,
Ready Thy choice to approve,
Thy providence to obey:
Enter into Thy wise design,
And sweetly lose our will in Thine.

Why hast Thou cast our lot
In the same age and place,
And why together brought
To see each other’s face:
To join with loving sympathy,
And mix our friendly souls in Thee?

Didst Thou not make us one,
That we might one remain,
Together travel on,
And bear each other’s pain;
Till all Thy utmost goodness prove,
And rise renewed in perfect love?

Then let us ever bear
The blessed end in view,
And join, with mutual care,
To fight our passage through;
And kindly help each other on,
Till all receive the starry crown.

O may Thy Spirit seal
Our souls unto that day,
With all Thy fullness fill,
And then transport away:
Away to our eternal rest,
Away to our Redeemer’s breast.

Amen

(Charles Wesley)

Submitted by Eric Brown