

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

**Lectionary Readings: Daniel 7: 1-18**  
**Psalms 111 and 117**  
**Luke 6: 17-31**

The Old Testament reading this week moves, for a single week, from the “puzzling” book – Ecclesiastes – to the eschatology of Daniel. His dream is dramatic but the imagery used needs ‘unlocking’ – time to consult the notes in the NIV Study Bible and any available commentaries.

At the beginning of his book we read of the fall of Jerusalem and Judah (under King Jehoiakim) to Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon. The latter has young ‘intelligent’ men from the Israelite royal family trained to serve in his service. Among them were Daniel (given the name Belteshazzar), Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The latter three also received Babylonian names and are better known to us as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. From the outset, these four young Jews determine to become untainted by Babylonian influence – to stay true to their faith.

Nebuchadnezzar, early in his reign, has a dream and calls for the ‘wise men’ of his court to give an interpretation. They fail; enraging the king when they state that only the gods can provide the explanation he has asked for. The angry king commands that all the wise men should be put to death – this includes Daniel and his friends although they were not part of the group advising the king. Daniel manages to get an audience with Nebuchadnezzar and after praying with his friends he receives insight in a dream and is able to interpret the king’s dream.

Daniel has a dream and he writes down ‘the substance’ of the dream, giving in fact, considerable detail. There is a parallel between Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in chapter 2 and Daniel’s dream in chapter 7. Nebuchadnezzar dreams of an “enormous, dazzling statue” with four distinct parts - a head of gold; chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze and legs of Iron. Daniel, in his vision, does not see a statue but rather four “great beasts. He has provided Nebuchadnezzar with an interpretation of his dream but clearly did not see the similarity – in verse 15 on in chapter 7 we read:

<sup>15</sup> ‘I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me. <sup>16</sup> I approached one of those standing there and asked him the meaning of all this.

‘So he told me and gave me the interpretation of these things: <sup>17</sup> “The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth. <sup>18</sup> But the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it for ever – yes, for ever and ever.”

<sup>19</sup> Then I wanted to know the meaning of the fourth beast, which was different from all the others and most terrifying, with its iron teeth and bronze claws – the beast that crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. <sup>20</sup> I also wanted to know about the ten horns on its head and about the other horn that came up, before which three of them fell – the horn that looked more imposing than the others and that had eyes and a mouth that spoke boastfully. <sup>21</sup> As I watched, this horn was waging war against the holy people and defeating them, <sup>22</sup> until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favour of the holy people of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.

<sup>23</sup> He gave me this explanation: “The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it. <sup>24</sup> The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. <sup>25</sup> He will speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws. The holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time, times and half a time. <sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>26</sup> “But the court will sit, and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed for ever. <sup>27</sup> Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the holy people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.”

<sup>28</sup> ‘This is the end of the matter. I, Daniel, was deeply troubled by my thoughts, and my face turned pale, but I kept the matter to myself.’

The ‘Lion with wings’ is normally associated with the Babylonian empire which was ultimately conquered by the Medo-Persians. The three ribs between the teeth of the bear could well refer to the Medo-Persians conquests of Lydia (546BC); Babylon (539BC) and Egypt (525BC). This empire, in its turn, was conquered by the Leopard of Greece under Alexander the Great. After his untimely death his territories were divided into four parts (the four wings?); Macedon and Greece, Thrace and Asia-Minor, Syria, Palestine and Egypt.

The fourth, all conquering kingdom – iron teeth of chapter 7; iron toes of chapter 2 - was yet to come; the Roman Empire. An NIV note tells us:

“The ten horns (chapter 2 – ten toes) indicate the comprehensiveness of the beast’s sphere of authority.”  
“another horn, a little one. The antichrist, or a world power sharing in the characteristics of the antichrist.”  
“mouth that spoke boastfully” :

2 Thessalonians 2:4:

He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

## Revelation 13: 5-6

The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise its authority for forty-two months. <sup>6</sup>It opened its mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling-place and those who live in heaven.

Our reading comes to a conclusion with a vision of a fifth and final kingdom – the vision of the ‘Ancient of Days’ seated on his throne in the presence of ‘thousands upon thousands’. This vision is similar in many ways to those given to St John in his ‘Revelation’.

In Daniel we have judgement on the boastful ‘little horn’ and the appearance of ‘one like a son of man’:

‘Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. <sup>12</sup>(The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.)

<sup>13</sup>‘In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man,<sup>[a]</sup> coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. <sup>14</sup>He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. **His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.**

### Footnotes

- a. [Daniel 7:13](#) The Aramaic phrase *bar enash* means *human being*. The phrase **son of man** is retained here because of its use in the New Testament as a title of Jesus, probably based largely on this verse.

To Daniel, ‘the one like a son of man’ is given authority – compare with ‘Revelation’, where the early vision of John is of the Lord seated on His throne; the twenty-four elders also seated on thrones; in the centre - the four living creatures and ‘the Lamb, looking as if it had been slain’ but receiving the acclamation of the four living creatures, the elders and thousands of angels:

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength  
and honour and glory and praise!

From the ‘complexity’ of Daniel we move to the ‘simplicity’ of Psalm 111 and Psalm 117. The first of these begins, and the second ends with an injunction and exhortation to “Praise the Lord”. This is an English transliteration of the Hebrew “Hallelu Yah” – ‘You praise’ and ‘Yah’, the latter being a shortened form of Yahweh and obviously acceptable in print.

הללויה  
HalleluYAH

(Yah also becomes part of some Hebrew names such as ‘Eliyahu’ – ‘Jehovah is God’ - better known to us as Elijah.) As a single word, and found in many other Psalms, we are more familiar with the exclamation ‘Hallelujah!’

A footnote in the NIV translation of Psalm 111 tells us that it is an ‘acrostic poem’. This means that the lines (as distinct from sections – Psalm 119) begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

The Psalmist states in verse 1 that “*I will extol the LORD with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly*”.

The following eight verses proclaim what the Lord has done, especially for His people. The final verse invokes response – “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding*”.

The Psalm then ends with the declaration – “*To him belongs eternal praise*”.

Psalm 117 must be, and is, the shortest Psalm in the Bible – only two verses in length!

(A ‘useless’ fact picked up from the internet - the Bible has 1189 chapters. The middle chapter is therefore number 595, which happens to be Psalm 117!)

This Psalm again exhorts the people to praise the Lord because of His love and faithfulness:

<sup>1</sup> Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples.

<sup>2</sup> For great is his love towards us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures for ever.

### **Hallelu Yah**

There is only a gospel reading from the New Testament this week. It comes from Luke and includes his account of ‘the Beatitudes’ – given in what could be called ‘the sermon on the plain’.

Immediately before our reading commences Jesus has spent the night in prayer on a mountainside. In the morning he calls *all who follow Him at the time*, his disciples, to come to Him.

He chooses twelve of them – the familiar names are there – to be apostles, those ‘sent with a special commission’.

Our reading starts “*He went down with them and stood on a level place.*” He goes down accompanied by the ‘inner circle – the newly appointed apostles’.

In Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount appears to have been delivered on a mountainside in Galilee with the crowd comprising people from; the immediate area; the Decapolis (10 Greek cities near the Jordan); Jerusalem; Judea and trans-Jordan.

In Luke’s account Jesus and the apostles descend to a level place where, again, there was a large crowd of other disciples and people from all over Judea; from Jerusalem but also from the northern coastal region around Tyre and Sidon.

The differences in these accounts have led to speculation that the teaching of Jesus was given on more than one occasion.

Teaching may have been given in various places to various crowds but the message remained very much the same. The final verse of our reading – “*Do to others as you would have them do to you*” – reminds me of a character in Charles Kingsley’s (novel for children) ‘The Water Babies’. That character - the name remains embedded from my childhood when I read the novel - is called Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby. I was surprised, a few years ago – when refreshing my memory re the plot and characters, to discover there was a sister with opposite characteristics; Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid! There is the contrast between a ‘Christian’ and a ‘Secular’ view of life.

This Victorian novel has disappeared into obscurity, largely because of its dismissive or insulting remarks about Americans, Jews, African Ethnic Groups, Catholics (particularly the Irish).

Such comments seem to fly in the face of Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby!

The teaching of Jesus recorded by Luke for this day divide into three sections:

1. Those who are described as blessed,
2. Those who are condemned – ‘Woe to you’,
3. Love for enemies.

Is there a message and a warning for all of us here, especially in these unusual and uncertain times? It appears that the poor, distressed and disadvantaged are those who are blessed and woe is expressed for those who have no material needs and worries. We can rejoice that the Christian Church is active in many areas reaching out to those in need, often playing the central part – Food Banks, Christian Aid, All we Can etc. – but the question must be ‘what is our personal involvement’? It is all too easy to feel we are playing our part by simply offering financial support, important as this is, from our position of security.

Look at the contrast in two verses from our reading:

<sup>22</sup>*Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.*

<sup>26</sup>*Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.*

The final section – Love for enemies – takes the concept of Do-as-you-would-be-done-by to a higher level:

- ‘But to you who are listening I say: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,  
<sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you.  
<sup>29</sup> If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them.  
<sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.  
<sup>31</sup> Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Brother, sister, let me serve you,  
let me be as Christ to you;  
pray that I may have the grace  
to let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,  
and companions on the road;  
we are here to help each other  
walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you  
in the night-time of your fear;  
I will hold my hand out to you,  
speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping;  
when you laugh I’ll laugh with you;  
I will share your joy and sorrow  
Till we’ve seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven  
we shall find such harmony,  
born of all we’ve known together  
of Christ’s love and agony.

Brother, sister, let me serve you,  
let me be as Christ to you;  
pray that I may have the grace  
to let you be my servant too.

Richard A. M. Gillard

1 John 4: 7-12 (NIV)

### God’s love and ours

<sup>7</sup>Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

<sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

<sup>9</sup>This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

<sup>10</sup>This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

<sup>11</sup>Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

<sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.