

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

Lectionary Readings: Judges 7: 2-22
Psalm 82
John 15: 9-17

The Old Testament reading takes us into the post-Moses and post-Joshua period of the History of Israel. Some leaders, even in the time of Joshua, were raised up when the faithful called out to God because the Israelites ‘did evil in the eyes of the Lord’ - (Judges 3&4 – Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah). There are 13 judges in the book of Judges; 15 in all if Barak is considered a co-judge with Deborah and Eli and Samuel (the last in the line) added to the list.

At the beginning of Judges 6 we read:

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. ² Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds. ³ Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. ⁴ They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys. ⁵ They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count them or their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it. ⁶ Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the LORD for help.

The first time we meet Gideon he is threshing wheat indoors – for fear of the Midianites. The angel of the Lord appears to him and says:

“The LORD is with you, you mighty warrior.”

Can you imagine Gideon’s initial reaction – “mighty warrior”, where is he? - Then the gradual realisation that the angel is addressing him; a fearful farmer. “Why are we in this situation?” he asks – “the Lord brought our people out of Egypt but now he has abandoned us to the Midianites”.

When told by the Lord (v14) to “*Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?*” we find Gideon making very human excuses - “*How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Mannaseh, and I am the least in my family.*” He receives an assurance that the Lord will be with him. We read, for the first time that he asks for a sign and it comes in the form of fire flaring from rock to consume the offering he has made to the Lord.

His next action, by night for fear of being seen, is to follow the Lord’s command and sacrifice the second bull from his father’s herd, having pulled down the altar to Baal and its associated Asherah pole that belonged to his father. A new altar to the Lord is built in its place and the sacrifice is burnt using the wood from the felled pole. The people are indignant when, in the morning, they see what has been done. They discover Gideon was responsible and demand that his father hands him over to be killed. It was his father’s altar that Gideon pulled down but father defends son and makes the significant statement:

“*If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar.*”

We are told that Gideon becomes known as “*Jerub-Baal*”; meaning - “*Let Baal contend with him.*”

Not long after this, the Midianites come in force against Israel and Gideon summons all the forces he can muster. For the second time he asks for a confirmatory sign that he is following the Lord’s will. The wool fleece placed overnight on the threshing floor – if the fleece is wet with dew in the morning, but not the ground; this will be the sign. It happens – but Gideon still does not have total confidence:

Then Gideon said to God, ‘Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece, but this time make the fleece dry and let the ground be covered with dew.’ ⁴⁰ That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew.

There have been three occasions when Gideon has “tested” the Lord – to discern the Lord’s Will.

Is this really what the Lord wants or is this what I think the Lord wants or even is this what I want?

It is clear from the Biblical passage that the Lord is not offended by Gideon’s honest and earnest enquiry.

In the following chapter of Judges – our reading today, there is no questioning what the Lord requests; Gideon has learnt to trust Him, ‘to trust and obey’.

I like the events described in our reading. The Israelite army faces the army of Midian – it’s possible that the Israelites could gain a victory, but that would only inflate their confidence in their own strength and importance.

The first thing the Lord tells Gideon is that he has too many men – what army commander of this time would logically accept that his army was too large? Gideon tells all who are afraid to go home – 22,000 leave and 10,000 remain!

There are still too many! – Gideon takes them to water, and it is just the 300 who drink cautiously that are chosen by the Lord, another 9,700 are sent home.

We now read that the Lord gives Gideon an ‘unrequested’ sign! Gideon and his servant Purah are told to creep into the enemy camp at night where they overhear conversation describing a dream and its interpretation.

The next day the 300, carrying trumpets, torches and jars (no weapons to hand), attack from three directions.

The smashing of the jars; the sudden flare of torches; the blowing of trumpets; the shouting – all suggest a huge army and the Midianites scatter in total confusion.

If we continue beyond the Lectionary verses and read to the end of the chapter, we find Gideon calling out the remainder of his original army to pursue the Midianites to the river Jordan.

As we read this passage in Judges I am challenged by some words written by Michel Quoist in 'Help me to say yes' from his 'Prayers of Life':

The Lord says, in reply to his prayer:

"You have asked for my approval, you have asked for my support, you have wanted to interest me in **your** work.
But don't you see, son, that you were reversing the roles,
I have watched you, I have seen your good-will,
And I want more than you, now.
You will no longer do your own works, but the will of your Father in Heaven.

What is the will of our Father in Heaven? Perhaps, like Gideon, we should be prepared to ask the Lord to give us a clear sign.

The Psalm today is headed "A Psalm of Asaph". It is one of a section, Psalms 73-83 along with number 50, attributed to this author - from a family of Levites, who we first encounter in 1 Chronicles 15 as a leading musician when David brings the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem.

In this Psalm we note the use of 'gods':

¹God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment among the 'gods':

⁵The "gods" know nothing, they understand nothing. They walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

⁶I said, "You are 'gods'; you are all sons of the Most High." ⁷But you will die like mere mortals; you will fall like every other ruler.'

At first reading there was a feeling that the psalmist was saying each one of us sees our self or each one behaves as though we were a 'god'!

One commentator gives three options for explaining "the great assembly" of "gods". The "gods" are:

1. Human judges who are condemned by the Great Judge for being unjust;
2. The principalities and the powers of other nations that oppress Israel;
3. Pagan deities judged by God, who rule the darkness of the world.

The first of these options speaks volumes into our modern secular, self-seeking society. The second was a natural inclusion for a poet of the time of David when there were many, many small kingdom states in constant conflict with each other.

The third option speaks of "pagan deities" and "the darkness of the world" – we are reminded by Paul (Ephesians 6) that we are in a constant spiritual battle:

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

¹¹ Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

¹² **For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.**

¹³ Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

Remember - Gideon 'tested' God and asked for a sign. St. John, writing his first letter, says to the infant Christians:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. **(NIV) or**

My dear friends, don't believe everything you hear. Carefully weigh and examine what people tell you. Not everyone who talks about God comes from God. There are a lot of lying preachers loose in the world. **(The Message)**

What is the message? - verses 3 and 4 fit in with the teaching of Jesus that we have seen in past weeks; to love God to our utmost and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

The Psalm ends with an appeal – "*Rise up, O God, judge the earth, for all the nations are your inheritance*".

Continuing from the comment, just made, about two verses of the Psalm fitting with the teaching of Jesus - our Gospel reading is concerned only with "love" – the "Love" of God for Jesus; the "Love" of Jesus for us; our "love" for each other.

Jesus links our relationship with Him to the relationship He has with His Father – if this right relationship exists we will experience 'joy' in our lives. We are in a new relationship with Him – one where we can describe ourselves as "friends of Jesus". He knows the mind of His Father and through Him we also know the mind, the will of the Father.

He calls us to 'love' – to be prepared to show sacrificial love, just as He showed sacrificial and reconciling love on the cross at Calvary.

He tells us that we have been chosen – to bear fruit that will have a lasting quality. We are reminded that immediately before the verses of our reading, and in the same chapter, we find "The Vine and the Branches". We are the fruiting branches; grafted into the 'root-stock' that is Jesus. His father is the gardener – cutting out the dead wood; pruning the fruitful branches.

Let us pray that we are not found among the dead wood; but how much pruning do we need – a little trimming here and there; a more extensive cut back; or even radical 'surgery' – to produce the desired lasting fruit?

O loving Lord, who art for ever seeking
Men of Thy mind, intent to do Thy will,
Strong in Thy strength, Thy power and grace bespeaking;
Faithful to Thee, through good report and ill –

To Thee we come, and humbly make confession,
Faithless so oft, in thought and word and deed,
Asking that we may have, in true possession,
Thy free forgiveness in the hour of need.

In duties small, be Thou our inspiration,
In large affairs endue us with Thy might;
Through faithful service cometh full salvation,
So may we serve, Thy will our chief delight.

Not disobedient to the heavenly vision,
Faithful in all things, seeking not reward,
Then, following Thee, may we fulfil our mission,
True to ourselves, our brethren, and our Lord.

Amen.

William Vaughan Jenkins

Lord, in the strength of grace,
With a glad heart and free,
Myself, my residue of days,
I consecrate to Thee.

Thy ransomed servant, I
Restore to Thee Thy own;
And, from this moment, live or die
To serve my God alone.

Charles Wesley

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