

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – Second Sunday of Advent (2nd Service)

Lectionary Readings: **1 Kings 22: 1-28**
 Psalm 40: (1-10), 11-17
 Romans 15: 4-1
 Matthew 11: 2-11

The Old Testament reading this week takes us back just over 100 years to the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah, in the days of King Ahab and King Jehoshaphat respectively. Commentators tell us that Ahab was probably the worst king ever to rule in Israel. *“Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him.”* (1 Kings 16:30) (Go back 4 chapters to 1 Kings 18 and we read the well known account of Elijah’s confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel – the worship of Baal by Israel greatly influenced by Jezebel the wife of Ahab). Jehoshaphat on the other hand, followed – at least initially – the righteous ways of his father Asa.

The passage we read today is found again in 2 Chronicles 18 with an interesting addition:

Now Jehoshaphat had great wealth and honour, and he allied himself with Ahab by marriage.

The alliance was formed by the marriage of Jehoram (his son) to Athaliah, daughter of Ahab. Why did Jehoshaphat “go down” to visit Ahab; indeed why did he form the alliance above? It has been suggested that Assyria was in the ascendancy and becoming a potential threat to both kingdoms but the initial verses concern land lost by Israel in a war against Aram. When asked if Judah will join a military campaign to regain this land, Jehoshaphat replies:

‘I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses.’

⁵ But Jehoshaphat also said to the king of Israel, ‘First seek the counsel of the LORD.’

This is where the story gets interesting! Ahab agrees to consult the Lord and calls on approximately 400 prophets who all tell him to go to war - *“for the Lord will give it (Ramoth Gilead) into the king’s hand”*.

Who were these prophets? They purport to speak for the Lord but clearly are giving the king the message they think he wants to hear. Jehoshaphat on the other hand is suspicious; he is not at all taken in, especially by the number of these prophets, and asks:

‘Is there no longer **a prophet** of the LORD here whom we can enquire of?’

⁸ The king of Israel answered Jehoshaphat, **‘There is still one prophet through whom we can enquire of the LORD, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad. He is Micaiah son of Imlah.’**

‘The king should not say such a thing,’ Jehoshaphat replied.

⁹ So the king of Israel called one of his officials and said, ‘Bring Micaiah son of Imlah at once.’

The messenger who goes to fetch Micaiah tries to influence him:

¹³ The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him, ‘Look, the other prophets without exception are predicting success for the king. Let your word agree with theirs, and speak favourably.’

¹⁴ **But Micaiah said, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, I can tell him only what the LORD tells me.’**

We then read the intriguing encounter between king Ahab and the prophet:

¹⁵ When he arrived, the king asked him, ‘Micaiah, shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or not?’

‘Attack and be victorious,’ he answered, ‘for the LORD will give it into the king’s hand.’

Is the prophet ‘toying with’ Ahab? Certainly the king does not believe this is the true message (because Micaiah has prophesied something in the king’s favour for once?).

¹⁶ The king said to him, ‘How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?’

¹⁷ Then Micaiah answered, ‘I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd, and the LORD said, “These people have no master. Let each one go home in peace.”’

¹⁸ The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, ‘Didn’t I tell you that he never prophesies anything good about me, but only bad?’

¹⁹ Micaiah continued, ‘Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne with all the multitudes of heaven standing round him on his right and on his left. ²⁰ And the LORD said, “Who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?”’

‘One suggested this, and another that. ²¹ Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before the LORD and said, “I will entice him.”’

²² “By what means?” the LORD asked.

“I will go out and be a deceiving spirit in the mouths of all his prophets,” he said.

“You will succeed in enticing him,” said the LORD. “Go and do it.”

²³ ‘So now the LORD has put a deceiving spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours. The LORD has decreed disaster for you.’

The reading ends with Ahab imprisoning the prophet but it is the latter who has the last word:

⁶ The king of Israel then ordered, 'Take Micaiah and send him back to Amon the ruler of the city and to Joash the king's son ²⁷ and say, "This is what the king says: put this fellow in prison and give him nothing but bread and water until I return safely."'

²⁸ Micaiah declared, 'If you ever return safely, the LORD has not spoken through me.' Then he added, 'Mark my words, all you people!'

If we read on in chapter 22 Ahab and Jehoshaphat do attack Ramoth Gilead – Ahab going in disguise while persuading Jehoshaphat to wear his royal robes. The latter is attacked until it is realised that this is not actually the king of Israel; meanwhile a random arrow hits the disguised Ahab and he is mortally wounded, his subterfuge has failed.

³⁷ So the king died and was brought to Samaria, and they buried him there.

³⁸ They washed the chariot at a pool in Samaria (where the prostitutes bathed), and the dogs licked up his blood, as the word of the LORD had declared.

"The word of the Lord had declared" is a reference to a prophecy of Elijah (1 Kings 21: 17-19):

¹⁷ Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite:

¹⁸ 'Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He is now in Naboth's vineyard, where he has gone to take possession of it.

¹⁹ Say to him, "This is what the LORD says: have you not murdered a man and seized his property?" Then say to him, "This is what the LORD says: in the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood – yes, yours!"

Ahab had tried, unsuccessfully, to purchase Naboth's vineyard; it is Jezebel who contrived a plan using the king's name, to get false charges brought against Naboth which resulted in his 'murder'. This is just one example of the evil seen during the reign of Ahab.

The account in 2 Chronicles includes the return of Jehoshaphat to Jerusalem and the criticism of his having formed an alliance with Ahab: (2 Chronicles 19: 1-3)

When Jehoshaphat king of Judah returned safely to his palace in Jerusalem, ² Jehu the seer, the son of Hanani, went out to meet him and said to the king, 'Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the LORD? Because of this, the wrath of the LORD is on you.

³ There is, however, some good in you, for you have rid the land of the Asherah poles and have set your heart on seeking God.'

The mixture of Religion and Politics is very complex in these Old Testament times. Self interest and personal power are important for many of the kings described – they are true autocrats. I wonder if we might see some resemblance to the world in which we live – the remnants of former super-powers?

It is easy to think of one on-going example of autocracy and the desire to preserve personal power and status. Where are the modern day prophets who bring 'the Word of the Lord'?

Once again, in Psalm 40, we turn to a Psalm of David.

In the 'optional' verses David again expresses his trust in the Lord.

As I read verse 1- "*I waited patiently for the Lord*" – I hear similar words, from another of David's Psalms, going through my head, in the musical setting by Felix Mendelssohn, "O rest in the Lord" (I actually went further than that and listened to Janet Baker singing the aria from 'Elijah').

In verses 1-3 he states the things the Lord has done for him personally - leading to the final part of verse 3 where he declares "*Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him*".

Verses 4 and 5 take us from "*Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord*", through "*Many are the wonders You have done*" to "*Were I to speak and tell of your deeds, they would be too many to declare.*"

Verses 6 and 7 dwell on what God does and does not want; leading to David saying "*I desire to do Your will.....*"

In the final two verses of the option David declares that he does not hide his 'faith' – he speaks of the Lord's faithfulness and His love.

We come then to the 'set' part of the reading – in this David typically makes his requests known to the Lord, ending again with confidence in what the Lord will do for him and for others who are faithful:

¹⁶ But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who long for your saving help always say, 'The LORD is great!'

¹⁷ But as for me, I am poor and needy; may the Lord think of me. You are my help and my deliverer; you are my God, do not delay.

Our reading from Romans concerns human relations. At the time of writing there was, no doubt, a real division in the Roman world between those of the Jewish faith and the rest – the ‘Gentiles’. Paul is writing to say that this division should not be found among the followers of Jesus.

He starts by saying that everything written in the Scriptures, over centuries, is there to bring encouragement and hope. He goes on to speak of “the mind of Christ Jesus”:

⁵ May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, ⁶ so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The “*attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had*” reminds us of the Great Commandment: (Matthew 22)

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”

³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

⁴⁰ **All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.**

Paul uses the rest of the reading to ‘make his case’ from the Old Testament:

⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews (*circumcision*) on behalf of God’s truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed ⁹ and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

As it is written:

‘Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name.’ (2 Samuel 22:50; Psalm 18:49)

¹⁰ Again, it says,

‘Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people.’ (Deuteronomy 32:43)

¹¹ And again,

‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him.’ (Psalm 117:1)

¹² And again, Isaiah says,

‘The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope.’

(Isaiah 11:10)

He concludes the passage with a prayer that we will often have heard at the end of a worship service:

¹³ **May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.**

In Matthew’s Gospel (chapter 3) we read of John the Baptist’s teaching about the ‘one to follow him’ and of his reaction when Jesus comes to be baptised:

‘I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.’

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, ‘I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?’

¹⁵ Jesus replied, ‘Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.’ Then John consented.

John is in prison – he has heard what Jesus is doing; is there now some uncertainty about Him; was John expecting very different preaching and action from ‘the Messiah’? He sends his disciples to ask directly if Jesus is the one he was proclaiming in the wilderness.

Typically Jesus does not give a direct answer of yes or no, instead he tells John’s disciples to go back and tell him a full account of what they have heard and seen.

Jesus then challenges the crowd – who was John? Why did they go out into the wilderness to see him?

Did you go to see a prophet?

The answer was yes – and a very special prophet he was:

This is the one about whom it is written:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” (Malachi 3:1)

Of the other Gospels, only Luke has a similar account and it has the following two verses (bracketed in the NIV translation):

All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus’ words, acknowledged that God’s way was right, because they had been baptised by John.

But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptised by John.

Our reading from Matthew ends with Jesus telling the crowd that no one greater than John the Baptist had ever been born but the very least person in the kingdom of heaven was greater than John.

It has been suggested that this marks the transition from John who was in an Old Covenant relationship with God to Jesus and the New Covenant that He brings.

Keith Getty and Stuart Townend have expressed this New Covenant: (PTO)

In Christ alone my hope is found,
He is my light, my strength, my song;
This Cornerstone, this solid Ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace,
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
My Comforter, my All in All,
Here in the love of Christ I stand.

In Christ alone! - who took on flesh,
Fullness of God in helpless babe!
This gift of love and righteousness,
Scorned by the ones He came to save:
'Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid;
Here in the death of Christ I live.

There in the ground His body lay,
Light of the world by darkness slain:
Then bursting forth in glorious Day
Up from the grave He rose again!
And as He stands in victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me,
For I am His and He is mine -
Bought with the precious blood of Christ.

No guilt in life, no fear in death,
This is the power of Christ in me;
From life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny.
No power of hell, no scheme of man
Can ever pluck me from His hand;
'Till He returns or calls me home,
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand!

Keith Getty and Stuart Townend

Article by Eric Brown