

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

Lectionary Readings: **Isaiah 35: 1-10**
 Psalm 132
 Colossians 1: 9-20
 Luke 2: 41-52

Isaiah 34 is headed (in the NIV) *“Judgement Against the Nations”*. Mentioned frequently in this chapter is Edom – in one way symbolic of all the enemies of God and His people, but also specific to the Edomites who opposed Israel at every opportunity. They were one of the peoples in conflict with King David: (2 Samuel 8)

¹³ And David became famous after he returned from striking down eighteen thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt.

¹⁴ He put garrisons throughout Edom, and all the Edomites became subject to David. The LORD gave David victory wherever he went.

In verse 9 of Isaiah 34 we read that *“the Lord has a day of vengeance”* – *“Edom’s streams will be turned to pitch”*. As a nation they had rejoiced at the Fall of Jerusalem: (Psalm 137: 7)

Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. ‘Tear it down,’ they cried, ‘tear it down to its foundations!’

They were allies of Nebuchadnezzar when he conquered the city and clearly wanted to eradicate all traces of it.

One commentator mentions that the name Edom in Hebrew sounds rather like the word for ‘red’. Several refer to the origins of the people of Edom – the descendants of Esau the twin brother of Jacob. We all remember the deception, used by Jacob, to gain his father’s blessing and how Esau sold his birthright to his younger brother for a *“Mess of pottage”*, a ‘meal of lentil stew’. Our first commentator suggests that the stew actually contained ‘red meat’, hence the name Edom.

Most of Isaiah 34 (verses 5-17) speaks of the Lord’s judgement – *“God will stretch out over Edom the measuring line of chaos and the plumb-line of desolation”*.

In contrast to the bleak scenes of Isaiah 34 - chapter 35, where we find our Old Testament reading, is headed *“Joy of the Redeemed”*.

The land, when the Edomites were overthrown would be desolate, but now there is a transformation:

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, ² it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

The people and the land will be refreshed, the ‘dangerous’ places become safe, when the Lord comes to redeem His people:

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

⁷ The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

The ‘Lord’s Highway’ will be there. *“But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the LORD has rescued will return”*.

Some see this picture of a highway through a metaphorically verdant ‘wilderness’ as the road leading back to Jerusalem from Babylon.

The people of Judah celebrated each year with three pilgrim feasts – going up to Jerusalem singing Songs/Psalms of “Ascent” but in this passage the prophet is speaking of the ‘return to Jerusalem’.

We can see a promise of Messianic times in verses 8-10:

⁸ And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it.

⁹ No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,

¹⁰ and those the LORD has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

In previous weeks I have referred to texts used by Handel in Messiah. Today I have music by Brahms (from his German Requiem) going through my head – “And the ransomed of the Lord shall return again, and come with singing unto Zion”.

The return to Zion, to Jerusalem, reminds us of the final part of the Apostle John’s Vision – Revelation 21:

Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death” or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’

⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’

⁶ He said to me: ‘It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. ⁷ Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.’

What a promise, but beware, if we read on in Revelation 21 there is a warning for those who do not walk in the ways of the Lord.

Psalm 132 is one of those 'Songs of Ascent' sung by the pilgrims as they made their way up to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple.

The Psalm commences by remembering David's desire to build a 'House for the Lord', a resting place for the Ark of the Covenant – what would have been the first Temple. We remember how this was prevented by the Lord – the promise being given that David's son Solomon would build it. David did however make preparations and even provide his son with plans! The Lord had told David that for all their time in the wilderness the Ark had resided in a tent – this was sufficient. Consequently when David brought the Ark to Jerusalem he pitched a tent in which to place it.

The Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem – this was the news heard in Ephrathah and Jaar – that which triggered the pilgrim 'ascent' to Jerusalem; *"Let us go to his dwelling-place, let us worship at his footstool"*

The remainder of the Psalm speaks of the promises the Lord has made to David, his descendants and His people. Remember - it is a jubilant Psalm, sung by pilgrims going up to the Temple to celebrate one of the great festivals.

The "meat" of our Bible Readings today lies in the writing of Paul to the Colossians. He reminds them of "**The supremacy of the Son of God**".

¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

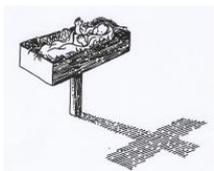
¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

¹⁹ **For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.**

The centrality of the cross – as John Bowring writes:

"In the Cross of Christ I glory: towering o'er the wrecks of time".

It may seem strange to concentrate on the Cross when we are celebrating the birth of the Saviour in Bethlehem, but remember this was why He came to earth in human form.



Back in my university days I received a Christmas card from a fellow student whose Hall of Residence was Harley Victoria College (then one of our ministerial training establishments). It was the college card for that year and showed the baby in the manger, the latter overshadowed by a far away central cross on a hillside.

It was the first time I had seen such an idea in print - a search of the internet today will show many images with this or similar themes!

It would appear from verse 9 that Paul was not familiar with the church in Colossae but had been praying for the Christians there from the first day he heard of them.

Paul prays for these people and he prays for specific things – things that we should be praying for ourselves.

1. For knowledge of His will through the wisdom and understanding given by the Holy Spirit.
2. That we might live lives worthy of the Lord – bearing fruit in good works and growing in knowledge of Him.
3. That we might be strengthened and empowered, showing endurance and patience.
4. Giving joyful thanks to the Lord for bringing us into His kingdom.

Paul concludes this opening section, reminding his readers again of what God has done for us in Jesus:

¹³ **For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.**

Our Gospel reading today requires little comment as it is a well known and straight forward story. We note that Mary and Joseph went up to Jerusalem each year for the Festival of Passover – one of the 'Ascents'.

Jesus was 12 years old – was this the first time he had accompanied his parents?

The Festival is over; they have travelled towards home a day's journey – all the time thinking Jesus is with friends and relatives, also returning to Nazareth.

Can you image their anguish when they realise he is not in the group; the urgent rush back to Jerusalem; the fruitless search for two days – where is he, what has happened to him?

And then, on the third day of searching, they find him in the Temple courtyard conversing with the teachers of the Law – as an equal, his understanding and answers causing amazement.

They couldn't understand his saying that he had to be in the Temple or alternative translation – “about his Father's business”.

We are told that He returned to Nazareth with them, was obedient at home and grew in wisdom, stature and favour with God and man.

Mary however remembered what he had said to them in the Temple and treasured this in her heart.

When we look at the Gospels we realise there were other occasions when she began to store up things about Jesus:

1. The message given by Gabriel at the Annunciation
2. The greeting of Elizabeth her relative and mother, to be, of John the Baptist
3. The explanation of the shepherds and the magi coming to the stable
4. Words of Simeon and of Anna when Jesus had been presented as an infant in the Temple

There may be further examples you can think of.

Mary must have been wondering just who she had for a son.

Born in the night,
Mary's Child,
a long way from your home;
coming in need,
Mary's Child,
born in a borrowed room.

Clear shining light,
Mary's Child,
your face lights up our way;
light of the world,
Mary's Child,
dawn on our darkest day.

Truth of our life,
Mary's Child,
you tell us God is good;
prove it is true,
Mary's Child,
Go to your cross of wood.

Hope of the world,
Mary's Child,
you're coming soon to reign;
King of the earth,
Mary's Child,
Walk in our streets again.

(Geoffrey Ainger)