

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

Lectionary Readings: **Isaiah 46: 3-13**
 Psalm 135: 1-14, (15-21)
 Romans 12: 1-8
 Matthew 2: 13-23

At 15 in the Methodist Hymn Book, 56 in Hymns and Psalms, 87 in Singing the Faith we find a mediaeval Jewish Doxology; translated by Max Landsberg and Newton Mann:

Praise to the living God!
All praised be his name,
who was, and is, and is to be,
for e'er the same!
The one eternal God
ere ought that now appears:
the First, the Last, beyond all thought
his timeless years!

Formless, all lovely forms
declare his loveliness:
holy, no holiness of earth
can his express.
Lo, he is Lord of all!
Creation speaks his praise,
and everywhere, above, below,
his will obeys.

His Spirit flowing free,
high surging where it will:
in prophet's word he spoke of old,
is speaking still.
Established is his law,
and changeless it shall stand,
deep writ upon the human heart,
on sea, on land.

Eternal life has he
implanted in the soul;
his love shall be our strength and stay,
while ages roll.
Praise to the living God!
All praised be his name,
who was, and is, and is to be,
for e'er the same.

Verse 3 – through the Holy Spirit God was speaking through the prophets; including of course Isaiah.

God asks:

'With whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared?'

He goes on to describe the people of that time who have goldsmiths make silver and gold 'gods' for them.

We are reminded that temples were established for such idols to be on permanent display – places where these 'gods' were worshipped.

The Lord says of these 'gods':

'Even though someone cries out to it, it cannot answer; it cannot save them from their troubles.'

We may not make gold or silver images with the purpose of worshipping them, but pause for a moment – what have you made central to your life; what have I made central to mine?

Matthew records that a young man came to Jesus to ask what he must do to inherit eternal life. When reminded of the 'everyday' Commandments he claimed that he had kept them all (We note that Jesus did not refer to any of the first three Commandments). The young man went away sad when told he lacked one thing; to sell all he had, give to the poor and follow Jesus. He had, and treasured, too many possessions – do we sense an echo here, for ourselves, as we live in this world dominated by things, luxuries etc.?

The Lord, speaking through Isaiah, goes on to remind the 'descendants of Jacob', exiled in Babylon, of that first Commandment delivered by Moses. He also declares that his purposes will be fulfilled:

⁸Remember this, keep it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels.

⁹Remember the former things, those of long ago;

I am God, and there is no other;

I am God, and there is none like me.

¹⁰I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come.

I say, "My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please."

¹¹From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfil my purpose.

What I have said, that I will bring about; what I have planned, that I will do.

¹²Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are now far from my righteousness.

¹³I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed.

I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendour to Israel.

This chapter in Isaiah is given the heading "*Gods of Babylon*" in the NIV and "*Babylon's False Gods*" in the NLT. The next chapter is headed "*The Fall of Babylon*" and "*Prediction of Babylon's Fall*" respectively.

What is meant in the reference to a bird of prey from the east and a man from a far-off land? Birds of prey may spend much of their time in rest and inactivity but when they strike it is a rapid event and generally successful. (I am waiting to catch sight of one of the young white tailed sea eagles, released on the Isle of Wight in 2019 and 2020!) Waiting 'in the wings' at this time was Cyrus, king of Persia (a man from the east); ready to strike and overthrow Babylon – it was in the first year of his reign over Babylon that Cyrus decreed the return of exiles to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple.

The Lord promises salvation to Zion. We remember that Matthew is writing his Gospel primarily from a Jewish perspective – in chapter 1 he states there to be fourteen generations from Abraham to David; fourteen from David to the Exile and fourteen from after the Exile to Jesus.

We have of course just celebrated again the birth of God's Son, Jesus – the promise of salvation now extends beyond Zion; God has made His purposes known. As Arthur Ainger writes:

God is working his purpose out, as year succeeds to year;
God is working his purpose out, and the time is drawing near;
nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God,
as the waters cover the sea.

March we forth in the strength of God, with the banner of Christ unfurled,
that the light of the glorious gospel of truth may shine throughout the world;
fight we the fight with sorrow and sin, to set their captives free,
that the earth may be filled with the glory of God,
as the waters cover the sea

What can we do to work God's work, to prosper and increase
the harmony of all the world, the reign of the Prince of Peace?
What can we do to hasten the time, the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God,
as the waters cover the sea.

All we can do is nothing worth, unless God blesses the deed;
vainly we hope for the harvest-tide, till God gives life to the seed;
yet nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God,
as the waters cover the sea.

May we seek the answer to the question raised in the second verse above – **“What can we do to work God's work?”**

I am reminded of one of Michel Quoist's 'Prayers of Life' – Help me to say “Yes”.

The Lord's response to Michel's 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.”

“Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as in heaven”

Once again, *“Praise the Lord”* at the beginning, in verse 3 and at the end of the Psalm is a translation of the Hebrew *‘Hallelu Yah’*.

Introducing this Psalm, in his famous Commentary, Matthew Henry writes:

This is one of the Hallelujah-psalms; that is the title of it, and that is the Amen of it, both its Alpha and Omega.

A It begins with a call to praise God, particularly a call to the “servants of the Lord” to praise him, as in Psalm 134 (v1-3).

B It goes on to furnish us with matter for praise. God is to be praised:

1. As the God of Jacob (v4)
2. As the God of gods (v5)
3. As the God of the whole world (v6-7)
4. As a terrible God to the enemies of Israel (v8-11)
5. As a gracious God to Israel, both in what he had done for them and what he would do (v12-14)
6. As the only living God, all other gods being vanity and a lie (v15-18)

C It concludes with another exhortation to all persons concerned to praise God (v19-21). In singing this psalm our hearts must be filled, as well as our mouths, with the high praises of God.

Footnotes in the NIV tell us that this Psalm, probably written after the return from the Exile and used in Temple worship was part of the “Great Hallel”.

The middle seven stanzas are a recital of God's saving acts for Israel, first in Egypt, then in Canaan. The remaining four stanzas make up two pairs related to each other by theme and language - verses 3-4, and 13-14 concern God's relationship with His people:

³ Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing praise to his name, for that is pleasant.

⁴ For the LORD has chosen Jacob to be his own, Israel to be his treasured possession.

¹³ Your name, LORD, endures for ever, your renown, LORD, through all generations.

¹⁴ For the LORD will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants.

Verses 5-7 and 15-18 remind us of the message of Isaiah – the Living God as opposed to man-made idols:

⁵ I know that the LORD is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods.

⁶ The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.

⁷ He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth; he sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses.

¹⁵ The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by human hands.

¹⁶ They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see.

¹⁷ They have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths.

¹⁸ Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.

The Psalm ends with another great exhortation to all peoples to Praise the Lord:

¹⁹ All you Israelites, praise the LORD; house of Aaron, praise the LORD;

²⁰ house of Levi, praise the LORD; **you who fear him, praise the LORD.**

²¹ Praise be to the LORD from Zion, to him who dwells in Jerusalem.

Praise the LORD.

When looking at the passage from Isaiah we asked the question – what is central to your life?

Paul in his first letter to the church in Corinth writes about building on a firm foundation – Jesus Christ. If we acknowledge Him as Lord and Saviour our salvation is secure – even though our poor ‘building’ (made from straw and hay) looks to be totally destroyed by fire; the foundation remains. In contrast Paul speaks of those who have built on the foundations with the best of materials which will come through any fire.

He addresses the same ideas when writing to the Romans but expresses them in a different way. God’s abundant mercy is there to establish our foundation of faith. That mercy was ultimately displayed as Jesus died on the Cross at Calvary – the sacrifice of God’s own Son for the redemption of the world.

In response we are called upon to make our own individual sacrifices – *“offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.”*

He goes on to say that we should not *“conform to the pattern of this world”* but we should become something totally new. The apostle John records that just before His arrest, Jesus is praying for His disciples in these words:

¹⁵ My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

¹⁶ **They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.**

¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

¹⁸ **As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.**

¹⁹ For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

We, like the disciples, live our everyday lives ‘in the world’ but we should not adopt the standards that are commonly seen around us. If *“we are transformed by the renewing of our minds”* we should be able to discern God’s will for us and act on it.

How open are our hearts and minds to the will of God, seen in the promptings of the Holy Spirit? Is the door wide open? Have we left that door ajar or have we even deliberately shut it - so that the Holy Spirit can only ‘squeeze’ in through any available crack?

Having addressed our personal life Paul moves on to write about the Church in a section, headed in the NIV, **“Humble service in the body of Christ”**.

There is an initial caution – don’t over inflate your opinion of yourself! Jesus told a story about the guest at a feast who, on arrival, seated himself in some lowly position - he would be invited to ‘come higher’ not told he had taken the seat allocated to somebody of greater importance. Can you imagine the two situations – the pleasant greeting, “What on earth are you doing sitting there? Come with me” or the embarrassing statement, “I’m afraid you have taken X’s seat, you will have to move down”.

Paul goes on to describe a Church fellowship as being like a body – there are many parts, each with a different but equal function. Each member is gifted by the Lord, to “serve the body of Christ”.

Do you know the ‘gift’ that the Lord has given to you?

The Gospel reading takes us back to the Christmas story – after the visit of the Magi. Joseph is warned in a dream that Herod is looking for Jesus, to kill Him.

It is only in the past couple of weeks that I have learned things about Herod that I never knew before! Herod was not a ‘natural Jew’ – he was an Edomite who had adopted Jewish customs. (Referring back to a previous week – the Edomites were descended from Esau and had a natural antipathy towards the people of Israel). Herod was the son of Antipater of Idumaeans, who was a high-ranking official for Hyrcanus II (the king, he was a Jew - of the Hasmonean dynasty and a long serving High Priest).

Despite local opposition, Herod, at the age of 25 was appointed Governor of Judea.

Hyrcanus II was king of Judea during this era in Jewish history, and his throne was usurped by his nephew,

Antigonus. Herod lost his power as governor, and he fled to Rome to appeal for help.

The Roman Senate supported his cause and ended up making him the new Jewish king.

Herod went back to Judah in 39 B.C. and married Antigonus’ niece so that he could have some legitimacy to the throne and the Jewish people.

He had to end up banishing his wife Doris and their son to pull this off. In 36 B.C., Herod defeated Antigonus and was finally able to claim the throne.

(Internet – Amazing Bible Timeline with World History)

Herod the Great (as he was known) had some notable achievements (the construction of the Temple and the fortress at Masada, supporting the ‘Olympic Games’, helping to avert food shortages in time of famine) but he was a tyrannical ruler. He had a number of sons assassinated because he feared they wanted to overthrow him. Like many leaders throughout history he became obsessed with position, power and authority – there are several similar examples that may come to mind in our present world!

We remember how he ‘deceived’ the Magi by sweetly asking them to let him know where the baby, ‘born to be King of the Jews’, was to be found so that he also could go and worship. We know well that he had other plans in mind. The Magi having been warned in a dream did not return to Herod and we read, in Matthew’s account, the latter’s reaction:

¹⁶ When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

¹⁸ 'A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.'

Remember, Matthew was writing his Gospel with a Jewish perspective; hence the two Old Testament prophecies mentioned in today's passage – that given above from Jeremiah and one earlier in the Gospel passage from Hosea:

¹³ When they (*the Magi*) had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.'

¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod.

And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'

'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. (Hosea 11: 1)

The escape to Egypt and the return to Nazareth are only recorded in Matthew – reference again the Jewish historical 'inserts'.

What does fascinate me, however, in this passage is found in the final four verses:

¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰ and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead.'

²¹ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

²² **But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there.**

Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³ and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth.

When Herod died his kingdom was divided into three main sections, each ruled by one of his sons - Archelaus in Judea, Antipas in Galilee and Transjordan (the biblical Herod of Holy Week) and Phillip in a mainly gentile area east and north of the Sea of Galilee.

Verse 22 above seems to suggest that Joseph and Mary intended to return to Judea – it is after being warned in another dream that they go to Nazareth. The impression left by Matthew's text is that the 'return' to Nazareth was never the intention – he again quotes unspecified prophets (no clear biblical prophecy can be found – who were these prophets?):

So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, *that he would be called a Nazarene.*

Only two of the Gospels have any reference to the Christmas story with both having some reference to Mary conceiving through the action of the Holy Spirit.

Luke has the pre-census journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the stable and the visitation of the shepherds.

Matthew mentions the birth of Jesus – in Bethlehem and the visit of the Magi, the event immediately before our reading today.

Looking at the section heading in various translations for verses 19-23 in today's reading does not provide any clarification as to the intended destination when Joseph, Mary and Jesus came back from Egypt.

The New International (NIV), New Living (NLT), English Standard Version (ESV) and New English (NET) translations all have "**The return to Nazareth**".

The Good News Bible (GNB) and New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) have "**The return from Egypt**".

In the New King James Version (NKJV) we find "**The Home in Nazareth**" and in the J.B. Phillips translation of the New Testament "**Jesus is brought to Nazareth**".

What is the answer? – I guess we will never know. The important thing is the subsequent message of Jesus conveyed clearly by all four of the Gospel writers.

Lonely travellers from the stable
Out beneath the hard blue sky
Journeying, wandering, hoping, praying
For the safety of their child
While our mother Rachel's weeping
Fills the streets of Bethlehem.
Kyrie eleison.

Warned by angels moved to save him
Who was born our kind to save
Joseph leads his holy family
Far from Herod and harm's way
Mary shielding and consoling
Jesus Christ the Son of God.
Kyrie eleison.

Fleeing from the land of promise
They in Egypt find a home
Strange the workings of God's mercy
House of bondage now God's throne
But for sons who all were murdered
Sorrow breaks the House of Bread.
Kyrie eleison.

True the tale of flight and exile
Out of Egypt comes God's Son
Angels tell of Herod's dying
All is ended, all begun
Jesus will grow up in Nazareth
And the world will all be stunned.
Kyrie eleison.

(Vincent Uher)

