

**Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – Sunday after Epiphany (2<sup>nd</sup> Service)  
or First Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Lectionary Readings:**           **Isaiah 42: 1-9**  
  **Psalm 46**  
  **Ephesians 2: 1-10**  
  **Matthew 3: 13-17**

Luke, in the fourth chapter of his Gospel, describes how Jesus returned to Galilee after His baptism in the river Jordan and the forty days of temptation in the wilderness (a time of resolving what was to be the form of His earthly ministry? – but more of that later.)

We read:

<sup>14</sup> Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.

<sup>15</sup> He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

The passage goes on to say that he returned to Nazareth and as was His custom went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. I don't know if it was expected that he would participate but He stood up to read. He hadn't been asked to read a specific Lectionary passage for the day, it was His choice limited only by being handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus clearly knew His scriptures for, *“Unrolling it (the scroll) he found the place where it is written”*:

<sup>18</sup> 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

<sup>20</sup> Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.

The reading was over and He sat down – by tradition this means He was about to teach; and we know those first words – *“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”*.

The passage from Isaiah that Jesus found and read, we find in chapter 61 (The year of the LORD'S Favour):

<sup>1</sup>The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
<sup>2</sup>to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour and the day of vengeance of our God,  
to comfort all who mourn,  
<sup>3</sup>and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,  
the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour.

We find our passage from Isaiah 42 (headed in the NIV as **“The servant of the Lord”**) shares many of the same thoughts, even some of the same words.

The passage commences with the Lord speaking of His coming servant and we immediately realise that 'this servant' was fulfilled in Jesus:

<sup>1</sup>Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.  
<sup>2</sup>He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.  
<sup>3</sup>A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.  
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;  
<sup>4</sup>he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.  
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.'

He goes on to say:

<sup>6</sup>'I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness;  
I will take hold of your hand.  
**I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles,**  
<sup>7</sup>**to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.**

In verse 7 we find near identical words as in Isaiah 61 - those read by Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue. There may be slight differences in the wording but the sentiment is identical.

Jesus says to those in the synagogue - *“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”*. This was a statement that He was the servant of the Lord promised by the prophet Isaiah.

The other highlighted line in the Lord's description of His servant makes reference to **“a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles”**.

There are a number of covenants in the Old Testament. After the Flood the Lord made a covenant with Noah; He made a covenant with Abram when calling him away from Ur, his home city; there was a covenant with Israel after Moses led the exodus from Egypt; there is a covenant with David and his descendants and finally Jeremiah speaks of the “new covenant”:

<sup>31</sup> ‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.

<sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,’ declares the LORD.

<sup>33</sup> ‘This is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time,’ declares the LORD.

‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God, and they will be my people.

<sup>34</sup> No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, “Know the LORD,” because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,’ declares the LORD.

‘For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’

The “new covenant” is to come, and we clearly relate it to Jesus – a covenant made with ‘the body and blood’ of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally we come to “the light to the Gentiles” and we give thanks for we are after all included in this category.

Lord, the light of Your love is shining,  
In the midst of the darkness, shining;  
**Jesus, Light of the world, shine upon us,**  
Set us free by the truth You now bring us,  
Shine on me, shine on me.

*Shine, Jesus, shine,  
Fill this land with the Father’s glory;  
Blaze, Spirit, blaze,  
Set our hearts on fire.  
Flow, river, flow,  
Flood the nations with grace and mercy;  
Send forth Your word,  
Lord, and let there be light.*

Lord, I come to Your awesome presence,  
From the shadows into Your radiance;  
**By the blood I may enter Your brightness,**  
Search me, try me, consume all my darkness.  
Shine on me, shine on me.

As we gaze on Your kingly brightness  
So our faces display Your likeness.  
Ever changing from glory to glory,  
Mirrored here may our lives tell Your story.  
Shine on me, shine on me.

When we consider how the ‘light’ of the ‘new covenant’ was brought to the Gentiles to create the early Christian Church I suppose we automatically think of the journeying and preaching of the apostle Paul. I always, therefore, have a quiet internal smile when I read in Acts how the Gospel was brought to Cornelius, the Roman centurion and his family. It was Peter who was entrusted with the message – responding to that dramatic vision of the lowered ‘sheet’ recorded in Acts 10.

Peter reveals his then, narrow, traditional view in the response he makes when instructed to kill and eat from the collection of ‘unclean’ animals. How do you think he felt when the vision was repeated three times? It was a very pointed, but effective, way of telling Peter the source of the vision!

He responds to the Spirit’s prompting and accompanies the three messengers back to Caesarea – on entering the house and finding a large crowd gathered he said this:

<sup>28</sup> ..... **‘You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.**

<sup>29</sup> So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?’

<sup>30</sup> Cornelius answered: ‘Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon.

Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me <sup>31</sup> and said, “Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor.

<sup>32</sup> Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.”

<sup>33</sup> So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.’

<sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak: **‘I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism <sup>35</sup> but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right .....’**

This event in the life of the early church is so significant that the whole account is repeated in Acts 11 when Peter, back in Jerusalem, is criticised by the Jewish believers – his account, especially his description of the Holy Spirit coming on Cornelius et al as he was speaking, convinces them:

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.’

The whole of our Old Testament reading has pointed to Jesus – the servant of the Lord who is yet to come. We give thanks that He did come, as promised - for His birth, for His teaching, for His death and resurrection, and, following His Ascension for the gifting of the Holy Spirit to each believer.

Psalm 46, our reading today, was the inspiration for that great hymn by Martin Luther – “*ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*”.

This first line echoes verse 1 of the Psalm, “*God is our refuge and strength .....*” - translations into English have rendered Luther’s German text as “A safe stronghold our God is still” (Thomas Carlyle) or “A mighty fortress (stronghold) is Our God” (Honor Mary Thwaites).

The ‘Companion to Hymns and Psalms’ suggests:

It is not known when Luther composed his version of Psalm 46. The most probable occasion was the Diet of Speyer, 20<sup>th</sup> April 1529, when the German princes made their formal protest against the withdrawal of certain privileges (from which comes the name Protestant). The hymn soon spread throughout Germany: the poet Heine subsequently described it as ‘the Marseillaise of the Reformation’.

The equivalent publication for the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book (Telford’s MHB illustrated in History and Experience) has further reference to words of Heine – suggesting that Luther and his companions had earlier sung these words as they entered Worms in 1521 - he had been summoned to appear before the ‘Diet of Worms’ to answer a charge of heresy for his writings. Telford records:

The great chorale by Luther was published with the hymn in 1529. Words and music soon spread over Germany. It became the National Hymn and the battle-song of the nation. It was Luther’s stay in some of the darkest hours of his life. Often in later troubles he would say to Melanchthon (*the first Protestant systematic theologian*), ‘Come, Philip, let us sing the 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm.’ The first line of the hymn is inscribed on Luther’s monument at Wittenburg.

I have photographs, (taken in 2014) of the Wittenburg monuments to Luther and to Melanchthon but unfortunately the ‘front’ of the monument I photographed did not have on it the ‘hymn inscription!

What was/is it in the Psalm that gives such confidence? In the first three verses, after “*God is our refuge and strength*”, the psalmist goes on to say that we will not fear even if the very fabric of the earth is disturbed. At the beginning of 2021 we may not be facing a physical catastrophe; we are in a very different situation but it is still a time to rely on the confidence brought by this Psalm – the Lord is with us, as we are reminded in verses 4-6.

Verse seven - “*The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress*” - and then God’s activity in the world is described until in verse 10 we read:

He (the Lord) says, ‘Be still, and know that I am God

We find a number of hymn/song writers have taken up this theme – three examples are found in Singing the Faith (18-20):

Be still and know that I am God. (18)  
Be still and know that I am God.  
Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am God, (19)  
and there is none beside me.  
Be still and know that I am God,  
and there is none beside me.

I am the Lord who saves and heals.  
I am the Lord who saves and heals.  
I am the Lord who saves and heals.

From Psalm 46: 10

(WGRG, Iona Community)

In you, O Lord, I put my trust.  
In you, O Lord, I put my trust.  
In you, O Lord, I put my trust.

Anonymous

Be still,  
for the presence of the Lord,  
the Holy One, is here;  
come bow before him now  
with reverence and fear:  
In him no sin is found -  
we stand on holy ground.  
Be still,  
for the presence of the Lord,  
the Holy One is here.

Be still, (20)  
for the glory of the Lord  
is shining all around:  
he burns with holy fire,  
with splendour he is crowned:  
how awesome is the sight -  
our radiant King of light!  
Be still,  
for the glory of the Lord  
is shining all around.

Be still,  
for the power of the Lord  
is moving in this place;  
he comes to cleanse and heal,  
to minister his grace:  
**no work too hard for him -  
in faith receive from him.**  
**Be still,  
the power of the Lord  
is moving in this place.**

David J. Evans

In conclusion, the psalmist reminds us again:

The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

I am going to make little comment on the Epistle reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. By this second Sunday of the New Year we have, or would normally have, renewed our Covenant promise. That Covenant is summed up in three verses from our reading:

<sup>8</sup> **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God –  
<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast.**

<sup>10</sup> **For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.**

James Jones (the former Bishop of Liverpool), when vicar of Emmanuel, South Croydon, often made reference to "Falling into Grace". Grace - that totally undeserved, God given, gift given to every believer. We note that Paul describes our very faith as another gift given to us by the Lord. We are called for a purpose – to carry out the works prepared for us by our heavenly Father.

As our Covenant Service reminds us:

"Christ has many services to be done: some are easy, others are difficult; some bring honour, others bring reproach; some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests, others are contrary to both; in some we may please Christ and please ourselves; in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.

Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us."

And so we made or make our response:

**"I am no longer my own but yours. Your will, not mine, be done in all things ....."**

The Gospel reading is the account, given by Matthew, of the baptism of Jesus. There is a clear reference to Jesus being baptised in three of the Gospels and an oblique reference in the fourth. Matthew and Mark tell us of **two** events that took place as Jesus was coming up out of the water of the river Jordan – 1. **He saw** the Spirit descending on Him like a dove, and 2. **A heavenly voice was heard** (by whom?) proclaiming Jesus to be 'God's Son, loved by and pleasing to His Father'.

Luke merely states that Jesus was baptised along with other people coming to John. It is afterwards, while He was praying, that the Holy Spirit descended and 'the voice' was heard. In this Gospel there is no indication as to who saw the Holy Spirit or who heard the heavenly voice.

The Baptist's initial reluctance to baptise Jesus, indeed his realised need to be baptised by Jesus, the baptism in the Holy Spirit he has been foretelling, is only mentioned in Matthew.

John has a rather different account:

<sup>24</sup> Now the Pharisees who had been sent <sup>25</sup> questioned him (*John the Baptist*), 'Why then do you baptise if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?'

<sup>26</sup> 'I baptise with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. <sup>27</sup> He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'

<sup>28</sup> This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

#### **John testifies about Jesus**

<sup>29</sup> The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

<sup>30</sup> This is the one I meant when I said, "A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me."

<sup>31</sup> **I myself did not know him**, but the reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.'

<sup>32</sup> Then John gave this testimony: 'I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.

<sup>33</sup> And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, "**The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.**"

<sup>34</sup> **I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One.'**

From this account it would appear that John had no idea Jesus was the 'Messiah' until he saw the Spirit come down and remain on him (during baptism?). The next day, John sees Jesus again and refers to Him, in the presence of Andrew and another of his disciples, as the Lamb of God. These two disciples leave John, follow Jesus and spend the day with him – Andrew then finds his brother Simon and introduces him to Jesus, the beginning of the twelve disciples and the renaming of Simon as *Cephas/Peter*.

The other three Gospels all record that after His baptism, Jesus is led into the desert "in the power of the Spirit" and 'tempted' for forty days.

What did happen in that desert? Matthew and Luke recount the three major temptations that came to Jesus – turning stones into bread; throwing Himself from the highest point of the Temple; gaining mastery over the world.

Going back to the first paragraph, was Jesus confronted by the devil – a specific spiritual being – or was He using the time to resolve a future course of action for His ministry?

Turning stones into bread or throwing Himself off the Temple would be dramatic gestures and sure to collect a large 'following' - for all the wrong reasons. He had the power to control the world, but would that be the right use of His powers?

Some of us will be happy to accept the Biblical account – the appearance of the devil - others may seek a more rational explanation. We are all prepared to accept that God works for good through the Holy Spirit, sometimes in unexpected and dramatic ways – why then do we hesitate with regard to other spiritual powers that are basically malign?

Later in his letter to Ephesus Paul warns us that we are in a battle:

<sup>10</sup> Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>11</sup> Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

<sup>12</sup> **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.**

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, <sup>15</sup> and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.

<sup>16</sup> In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>17</sup> Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

<sup>18</sup> **And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.**

Let us pray, at this early stage of 2021, that we may seek, be shown, and act on, God's plan for our lives.

Let us learn to *"pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests."*

Come, let us anew  
Our journey pursue,  
Roll round with the year,  
And never stand still till the Master appear.

His adorable will  
Let us gladly fulfil,  
And our talents improve,  
By the patience of hope and the labour of love.

Our life is a dream  
Our time as a stream  
Glides swiftly away,  
And the fugitive moment refuses to stay.

The arrow is flown,  
The moment is gone;  
The millennial year  
Rushes on to our view, and eternity's here.

O that each in the day  
Of His coming may say:  
I have fought my way through,  
I have finished the work Thou didst give me to do!

O that each from his Lord  
May receive the glad word:  
Well and faithfully done;  
Enter into My joy, and sit down on My throne!

Charles Wesley

**Eric Brown**