

## Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – Second Sunday in Ordinary Time (2<sup>nd</sup> Service)

**Lectionary Readings:**                **Isaiah 60: 9-22**  
    **Psalm 96**  
    **Hebrews 6:17 – 7:10**  
    **Matthew 8: 5-13**

Surely the islands look to me; in the lead are the ships of Tarshish, bringing your children from afar, with their silver and gold, to the honour of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendour.

What a strange way to start a reading! – Part way through a chapter and no heading for the section.

Which islands are being referred to? What are these “*ships of Tarshish*”?

If we look back to the beginning of Isaiah chapter 60 we read more familiar words and we get the feel for restoration brought about by the Lord:

### **The glory of Zion**

<sup>1</sup>Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.

<sup>2</sup>See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.

<sup>3</sup>Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

<sup>4</sup>Lift up your eyes and look about you: all assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the hip.

<sup>5</sup>Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come.

<sup>6</sup>Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah.

And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.

<sup>7</sup>All Kedar’s flocks will be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth will serve you; they will be accepted as offerings on my altar, and I will adorn my glorious temple.

<sup>8</sup>Who are these that fly along like clouds, like doves to their nests?

Seeking answers to the questions asked in the first paragraph leads to a pathway of footnote references – go to the first, only to be led to a second etc. “*Surely the islands look to me*” is referred to Isaiah 11:11, which comes at the end of the well known passage describing “The Branch from Jesse”. We read:

In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the surviving remnant of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, (*Upper Nile*) from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the **islands of the Mediterranean**.

A footnote, here, in the NIV Study Bible tells us “*The coastlands and islands of the Mediterranean are probably intended.*” Three more references are given! – Isaiah 41: 1&5, Isaiah 42: 4 and Genesis 10: 5. The last of these does not refer directly to ‘the islands’ but describes how the descendants of Japheth, one of Noah’s sons, spread out to become a maritime people.

“*The ships of Tarshish*” can more generally be translated as trading ships – bringing people back to Zion, along with their silver and gold. There may be remembrance here of the early, great, days of King Solomon as recorded in 1 Kings 10:

<sup>21</sup>All King Solomon’s goblets were gold, and all the household articles in the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon were pure gold. Nothing was made of silver, because silver was considered of little value in Solomon’s days.

<sup>22</sup>The king had a fleet of trading ships at sea along with the ships of Hiram.

Once every three years it returned carrying gold, silver and ivory, and apes and baboons.

A further footnote here tells us that the Hebrew translated as “*fleet of trading ships*” actually reads “*fleet of ships of Tarshish.*”

1 Kings 5 records how Hiram, King of Tyre, provided cedar wood from Lebanon for the building of the Temple in Jerusalem and this is referred to in verse 13 of today’s reading – “*The glory of Lebanon will come to you .....*”

We recall that the whole of Isaiah chapter 60 comes under the heading – “**The Glory of Zion**”. The prophet is telling of a time when the Lord will have restored and renewed His people. Each verse that we read promises something new for the people of Israel – at some point in the future. The passage, and the chapter, ends with a statement:

**“I am the LORD; in its time I will do this swiftly”**

What is the Lord’s time? We are reminded of words penned by Isaac Watts.

A thousand ages in Thy sight  
Are like an evening gone;  
Short as the watch that ends the night  
Before the rising sun.

We do not know the Lord’s timetable, but our trust is in Him believing that “*all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose*”. (Romans 8: 28 KJV)

Isaiah describes the redeemed and righteous people, in the words of the Lord:

“*They are the shoot I have planted, the work of My hands, for the display of my splendour*”.

Psalm 96 is a declaration of the Lord's splendour, majesty and sovereignty. There is an opening instruction to "*Sing to the Lord*", to "*Praise His name*" and to *Proclaim His salvation day after day*). The concept of "Singing to the Lord" should come easily to any of our congregations for we find written in the first line of the Preface to the 1933 Hymn Book:

"Methodism was born in song".

In 1979, on a train journey from London to Chesterfield, Brian Hoare (inspired by those words from the Preface) wrote the six verses of H&P 486 (STF 21) – Born in Song! I remember Donald English, preaching at Addington (Croydon) and commenting that Brian could put a station/location to each of the verses.

Born in song! God's people have always been singing. Born in song! Hearts and voices raised. So today we worship together; God alone is worthy to be praised. Praise to God! For he is the one who has made us. Praise to God! We his image bear. Heaven and earth are full of his glory; let creation praise him everywhere. Christ is King! He left all the glory of heaven. Christ is King! Born to share in our pain; crucified, for sinners atoning, risen, exalted, soon to come again.	Sing the song! God's Spirit is poured out among us. Sing the song! He has made us anew. Ev'ry member part of the Body; Given his power, his will to seek and do. Tell the world! All power to Jesus is given. Tell the world! He is with us always. Spread the word, that all may receive him; Every tongue confess and sing his praise. Then the end! Christ Jesus shall reign in his glory. Then the end! of all earthly days. Yet above the song will continue; All his people still shall sing his praise.
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Turning to the Index of Biblical Texts at the back of *Singing the Faith* we find Brian Hoare's hymn is more associated with Psalm 100 than with Psalm 96 – they have similar opening verses in "*Sing to the Lord a new song*" and "*Shout for joy to the Lord*".

It is sometimes difficult to see the connection between the 'Text' and the associated hymn or verse of hymn. One complete hymn that is linked in the STF Index to Psalm 96 is that of Isaac Watts – Joy to the world, the Lord is come! (STF 330).

[Other 'equivalent indexes' however make a link, for this hymn, to two Psalms – 96 and 98.]

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King; let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing, and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.	Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns! Let all their songs employ; while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy, Repeat, repeat the sounding joy,  He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love, and wonders of his love, and wonders, wonders of his love,
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Looking at the Psalm itself, we see the writer exhorting his 'readers' to "Sing, Praise, Proclaim", in the first three verses. In the next three the "Greatness, Splendour and Majesty" of the Lord are described.

The Psalmist then calls on nations to "*Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength*" and to "*Worship the LORD in the splendour of His holiness*". These words bring to mind one modern song – based on Deuteronomy 32: 3-4 (*Ascribe greatness to our God, the Rock*); and one traditional hymn (*O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness*). The Psalm then ends:

- <sup>11</sup> Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it.  
<sup>12</sup> Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.  
<sup>13</sup> Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.

The Epistle reading, from Hebrews, also seems to start at a strange point. Immediately before it commences we have:

#### **The certainty of God's promise**

- <sup>13</sup> When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, <sup>14</sup> saying, 'I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.' (*Genesis 22:17*)  
<sup>15</sup> And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.  
<sup>16</sup> People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument.

The writer goes on to say that God confirmed what He had done in Jesus with an oath – it gives us great hope. Verse 19 is one that was very meaningful to me in my youth – remembered in the Authorised Version Language.

A young Territorial Army officer and Sunday School teacher in Glasgow commented to friends that he could control 100+ men on a Saturday parade but failed completely when ‘handling’ a small number of boys on a Sunday. It was suggested that he might like to try some of his army methods with the boys and so in 1883 the oldest uniformed youth organisation came into being. William Alexander Smith adopted, as its badge, an anchor with my meaningful words from verse 19.



That organisation, founded in 1883, is of course The Boys’ Brigade. I had the pleasure and privilege of being a member of the 1<sup>st</sup> East Cowes Company, attached to our Methodist Church in that town.

<sup>19</sup> which *hope* we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; <sup>20</sup> whither the forerunner is for us entered, *even* Jesus (Authorised Version)

<sup>19</sup> We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, <sup>20</sup> where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. (NIV)

The author of Hebrews goes on to say that “*Jesus has become a high priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek*”.

What do you know about this “*king of Salem and priest of God Most High*”, how many times is he mentioned in the Bible?

The answer to the second part of the question is ten times – once in Genesis 14; once in Psalm 110 and eight times in the letter to the Hebrews. Ten times mentioned by name but only one actual appearance! Genesis 13 records the separation of Abram and Lot – the younger man choosing the lush plain of the River Jordan; pitching his tents, we are told near the ‘wicked’ city of Sodom. The first 12 verses of chapter 14 is an account of warring tribes – ending with the overthrow of the king of Sodom, the ransacking of the city and the capture of Lot and everything he owns. News is brought to Abram who sets out, successfully, to recover Lot, his family and their possessions. From verse 17 of chapter 14 we read:

<sup>17</sup> After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King’s Valley).

<sup>18</sup> **Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine.** (a normal meal – not to be associated with ‘communion’) **He was priest of God Most High, <sup>19</sup> and he blessed Abram, saying,**

**‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth.**

**<sup>20</sup> And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.’**

**Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.**

Some commentators tell us that in those days some kings also served as high priests – this gave them a status above that of Levi and his descendants!

Who was this Melchizedek? He was not of Hebrew descent yet he is described as “*a priest of God Most High*”. We know nothing of his origin or demise, there is no record of birth or of death. What we do know is that he blesses Abram and he receives one tenth of all Abram has.

As the author of Hebrews reminds us, a blessing is bestowed by the greater on the lesser and the tithe is given the other way round. Melchizedek is therefore greater than Abram (the father of the Hebrew nation). The writer sees a similarity with Jesus:

<sup>3</sup> Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest for ever.

We will probably never know who this king was - coming out with refreshments to meet the battle weary yet triumphant Abram; to deliver a blessing and to receive a tithe. We do know that the writer of Hebrews saw a similarity with the life of Jesus and we remember again the hope we have in His death and resurrection:

<sup>19</sup> We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, <sup>20</sup> where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.

We are reminded that Paul, speaking of ‘HOPE’, separates it from certainty:

<sup>24</sup> For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?

<sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

The centurion was a man with HOPE and more than that FAITH.

When he comes to Jesus, saying simply that his servan is very ill, the reply is - “*Shall I come and heal him?*”

The response of the centurion is astounding – “*Just say the word and that will be enough*”. He falls back on his military training, the authority he has as a Roman officer.

Jesus is amazed by the answer given:

<sup>10</sup> When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, ‘Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.

He goes on to warn that many ‘outsiders’ will be welcomed into the Kingdom **and** many ‘insiders’ will be rejected. We can read these words in the historical context of Jew and Gentile but they still have relevance for us today.

James, in his letter, reminds us:

**Faith and deeds**

<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?  
Can such faith save them?

<sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food.

<sup>16</sup> If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

<sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

<sup>18</sup> But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’

**Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.**

Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,  
When the clouds unfold their wings of strife?  
When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,  
Will your anchor drift, or firm remain?

*We have an anchor that keeps the soul  
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll;  
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,  
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour’s love!*

Will your anchor hold in the straits of fear?  
When the breakers roar and the reef is near;  
While the surges rave, and the wild winds blow,  
Shall the angry waves then your bark o’erflow?

Will your anchor hold in the floods of death,  
When the waters cold chill your latest breath?  
On the rising tide you can never fail,  
While your anchor holds within the veil.

Will your eyes behold through the morning light  
The city of gold and the harbour bright?  
Will you anchor safe by the heavenly shore,  
When life’s storms are past for evermore?

**Eric Brown**