

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

**Lectionary Readings:**                   **Numbers 13: 1-2, 27-33**  
  **Psalm 5**  
  **Philippians 2: 12-28**  
  **Luke 5: 1-11**

For once the Old Testament reading does not require an extensive background; it is the simple and well known account of Moses sending 12 ‘spies’ across the river Jordan and into Canaan – the Promised Land.

We note in verse 1 that it is an instruction from the Lord to Moses and He makes clear the promise, given earlier, that Canaan is being given to the Israelites.

When Moses first goes to Pharaoh, after his call at the burning bush, conditions for the enslaved Israelites are made worse – they have to make bricks without straw. Moses turns to the Lord, questioning the purpose of his calling: (Exodus 5: 22 – 6:5)

### **God promises deliverance**

<sup>22</sup> Moses returned to the LORD and said, ‘Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me? <sup>23</sup> Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and you have not rescued your people at all.’

**6** Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country.’

<sup>2</sup> God also said to Moses, ‘I am the LORD. <sup>3</sup> I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, (*El-Shaddai*) but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them.

**<sup>4</sup> I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they resided as foreigners. <sup>5</sup> Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant.**

The people of Israel, constantly complaining, are led out of Egypt but because they are wayward there is no direct path to Canaan – they wander for forty years in the wilderness; fed on Manna: (Exodus 16: 34-35)

<sup>34</sup> As the LORD commanded Moses, Aaron put the manna with the tablets of the covenant law, that it might be preserved. <sup>35</sup> The Israelites ate manna for forty years, until they came to a land that was settled; they ate manna until they reached the border of Canaan.

Moses sends a leader from each of the 12 tribes of Israel into Canaan. They come back with a very positive result – *“We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey!”* Fruit was brought back to show the fertility of the land. We then come, in their account, to the small yet highly significant word – BUT.

Ten of the twelve ‘spies’ list the problems – powerful people, large fortified cities, a people of great size. Only one of the twelve spoke encouraging words – Caleb, son of Jephunneth, from the tribe of Judah:

*“We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.”*

The disenchanted 10 tell the Israelites that the people of Canaan are stronger than they are; the land ‘devours’ those living in it (NIV, NKJV); (a land that swallows people whole – The Message); and there are ‘giants’ among the people. Remembering the ‘history’ of Israel after the Exodus it is not surprising that the people side with the majority and a rebellion is recorded in chapter 14:

### **The people rebel**

**14** That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. <sup>2</sup> All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, ‘If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! <sup>3</sup> Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?’ <sup>4</sup> And they said to each other, ‘We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.’

<sup>5</sup> Then Moses and Aaron fell face down in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there. **<sup>6</sup> Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes <sup>7</sup> and said to the entire Israelite assembly, ‘The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. <sup>8</sup> If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. <sup>9</sup> Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them.’**

<sup>10</sup> But the whole assembly talked about stoning them. Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. <sup>11</sup> **The LORD said to Moses,**

‘How long will these people treat me with contempt?’

How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them?’

<sup>12</sup> I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but **I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they.’**

Hoshea, son of Nun from the tribe of Ephraim was the other leader who sided with Caleb. We of course know him better by the name given to him by Moses – JOSHUA. Hoshea means *“salvation”* and Joshua *“The LORD saves”* – a footnote in the NIV Study Bible reminds us that JESUS is the Greek form of JOSHUA.

We remember that Moses was forbidden to cross the Jordan into Canaan, he had only a sight of it from Pisgah (Deuteronomy 3) – the leadership passed to Joshua.

At the end of his life Joshua renews the Lord's Covenant with Israel at a place called Shechem.

Speaking to the people he issues a challenge: (Joshua 24: 14-15)

<sup>4</sup> Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshipped beyond the River Euphrates and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.

<sup>15</sup> But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living.

**But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.'**

Returning to that moment when ten leaders say the Israelites are incapable of conquering Canaan; only Caleb and Joshua say 'Yes, we can'. Is there a challenge for us today in this story, a challenge for those who believe in the Lord?

In our Christian lives, do we see the possibilities or the problems?

Would we have stood with Joshua and Caleb or supported the other 10 tribal leaders?

Are we, in our words or in our actions putting a limit on what the Lord can do?

Paul writing to the Christians in Rome said: (chapter 12)

<sup>2</sup> Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

And to the Philippians: (chapter 4)

<sup>13</sup> I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Matthew Henry, in his introduction to Psalm 5, writes:

The psalm is a prayer, a solemn address to God, at a time when the psalmist was brought into distress by the malice of his enemies. Many such times passed over David, nay, there was scarcely any time of his life to which this psalm may not be accommodated, for in this he was a type of Christ, that he was continually beset with enemies, and his powerful and prevalent appeals to God, when he was so beset, pointed at Christ's dependence on his Father and triumphs over the powers of darkness in the midst of his sufferings.

The NIV Bible Commentary states that:

This psalm is generally categorized as an *individual lament* psalm.

It shares elements of the psalms of *confidence* (vv.1-3; 8-12) and also of *community lament* (vv.11-12).

The commentators divide the psalm into four sections:

1. A prayer for God's Justice (vv. 1-3)
2. Affirmation of God's hatred of evil (vv.4-6)
3. Hope in Fellowship with God (v.7)
4. Prayer for and hope in God's Righteousness (vv.8-12)

A book on "The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament" (Old Testament Survey by La Sor, Hubbard and Bush) has this introduction to the Psalms:

For at least two thousand years the Psalter has been divided into five books (psalms 1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150). The best explanation of this grouping is that the various sections may represent stages in the process of collection. That process stretched out over more than five hundred years. The earlier collections contained psalms attributed to David (3-41; 51-71), Korah (42-49) and Asaph (50, 72-83). To this were added some smaller collections like the Songs of Ascent (120-134) and the psalms which use "Hallelujah" (146-150).

Five books were formed, probably following the pattern of the Pentateuch. Indeed, the number of psalms (150) follows closely the number of sections into which the Pentateuch is divided for reading in the synagogue (153). Synagogue practice in the post-biblical period may have called for using a Psalm with each reading from the Pentateuch.

The Daily Study Bible commences its comments on this psalm:

This psalm has been used down the centuries as a morning hymn, particularly on entering the sanctuary (see verse 7). It is composed in the Davidic style, comes from the temple choirmaster's music collection, and so is intended to be accompanied by an orchestra of **\*\*"flutes"\*\*. 1 Chronicles 15: 16 tells us that David appointed singers and players even before his son, Solomon, built the temple.**

**\*\*"flutes"\*\*.**

The translation, used and printed, in the Daily Study Bible has as the "inscription":

*'To the choirmaster: for the flutes. A Psalm of David'.*

The NIV translation has:

*'For the director of music. For pipes. A psalm of David'.*

We find in the 1599 Geneva Bible, which is more directly related to the original Hebrew:

*'To him that excelleth upon Nehiloth. A Psalm of David'.*

Matthew Henry says of *Nehiloth* - it is a word nowhere else used; is conjectured to be a wind instrument, in the same way *Neginoth* was supposed to signify stringed instruments.

Dr. Knight, in the Daily Study Bible, makes a comment on verses 4 and 5 - which read:

<sup>4</sup>For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness; with you, evil people are not welcome.

<sup>5</sup>The arrogant cannot stand in your presence. You hate all who do wrong;

<sup>6</sup>you destroy those who tell lies. The bloodthirsty and deceitful you, LORD, detest.

He observes that the psalmist takes the wrath of God for granted, as did Jesus. He goes on to observe that there are Christians today who are shocked by this idea and cannot countenance a wrathful God. I am reminded of an Anglican vicar of my acquaintance (I may have mentioned this before) who would not permit Keith Getty and Stuart Townend's "In Christ alone my hope is found" to be sung in his church, because of one line in verse 2:

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.

One of my recent internet searches has advertised a paperback (published in 2012) written by Tom Stuckey which in its title asks the question - "The Wrath of God Satisfied?" The contents summary for the book includes this précis:

"Tom Stuckey argues that because we live in a violent world, we should not dismiss the idea of the wrath of God or the disturbing metaphors of blood, debt, satisfaction, and sacrifice".

I think I will be following this up and making a purchase!

Psalm 5, written at a time when the psalmist was in distress, nevertheless ends with an expression of confidence:

**<sup>12</sup> Surely, LORD, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favour as with a shield.**

To again quote Dr. Knight - his concluding comments on the Psalm mention Sir Jacob Astley, commander of the Royalist foot-soldiers at the first battle of the Civil War (Edgehill):

Sir Jacob must surely have known this psalm by heart and reveals his complete confidence in God when he prays:

**"O Lord, thou knowest how busy I must be this day. If I forget thee, do not thou forget me."**

Our reading from the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians mentions Timothy – he was clearly with Paul when the letter was written as can be seen from the greeting at the beginning of the letter:

**1** Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi,  
together with the overseers and deacons:

**2** Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It becomes clear, a little later in chapter 1, that Paul is in prison. It is generally accepted that he was in Rome, under house arrest – allowing friends to come and go and placing no restriction on the preaching of the Gospel:

**Paul's chains advance the gospel**

**12** Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.

**13** As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

**14** And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

What then did he have to say, in our reading, to the Christians in Philippi? "*Do everything without grumbling.*"

I wonder - do you, do I, ever grumble? We are likely to when things in life are not working out as we had hoped or, dare we even say, 'planned'. After telling the Philippians not to grumble, Paul continues:

**12** Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, **13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.**

This reminds us, once again, of the Covenant promise we renew each year – we should be content in all situations, knowing that the Lord is working His will in our lives.

The second half of the reading is very different in nature, dealing with down to earth practical matters. In Acts 16 we read of Paul making his second Missionary Journey with the clear intention of going into Asia Minor to preach the Gospel.

This was not what the Lord intended and the Holy Spirit intervened, preventing them from making their planned journeys, culminating in Paul's vision of 'the man of Macedonia'.

**10** After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

**11** From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. **12** From there we travelled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

<sup>13</sup> On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.

<sup>14</sup> One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. <sup>15</sup> When she and the members of her household were baptised, she invited us to her home. 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay at my house.' And she persuaded us.

It would appear that Luke joined the 'missionary party' at Troas – the language changes from 'they' to 'we'.

Philippi was a thriving Roman colony and apparently had no synagogue – Paul going out of the city to the riverside where he found those who worshipped God. It is in Philippi that Paul and Silas are imprisoned after a riot is stirred up because they have healed a fortune telling slave girl – placed in an inner cell with feet secured in stocks; singing hymns as midnight approaches. A violent earthquake opens the prison doors and the fearful gaoler is about to kill himself when Paul declares that no one has escaped. The gaoler and his household become further converts to the Gospel.

I have always liked the final part of this 'story' – Paul stands on his dignity in declaring that he is a Roman Citizen and has been wrongly treated. The fearful magistrates have to personally come to the prison and offer an apology. They escort Paul and Silas to safety but request them to leave the city, which they did after meeting the 'congregation' at Lydia's house.

On his third Missionary Journey Paul travelled through Macedonia – revisiting established bands of believers, including those at Philippi.

We know that Paul was in the habit of leaving Timothy or Silas or both of them together to consolidate work in a specific place while he moved on in his journeying. It is not surprising, therefore, to read that he hopes to send Timothy to Philippi – for several reasons:

<sup>19</sup> I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, **that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you.**

<sup>20</sup> **I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare.** <sup>21</sup> For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. <sup>22</sup> But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.

<sup>23</sup> I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me.

Paul goes on to say that he is confident of being released from arrest and that he will come again to Philippi. We know that he was released from this first *house*-arrest and many scholars believe there is some evidence to suggest a fourth journey which probably took him to Philippi again.

The final paragraph shows the Philippians reciprocated concern for Paul. They have learned he is under arrest and send Epaphroditus, who Paul describes as a brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, to bring their messages but also to look after the Apostle.

The Philippians know Epaphroditus has been ill and are concerned for him. Paul tells them that he has been very ill, almost at the point of death, but has now recovered – he is anxious to send him back for the joy this will bring to the Philippian Christians.

Paul has a special relationship with the Church he has planted in Philippi – this is clear at the end of the letter and a passage we will come back to in two weeks time:

<sup>14</sup> Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. <sup>15</sup> Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; <sup>16</sup> for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. <sup>17</sup> Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. <sup>18</sup> I have received full payment and have more than enough. **I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent.** They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.

<sup>19</sup> **And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.**

<sup>20</sup> To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

#### **Final greetings**

<sup>21</sup> Greet all God's people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me send greetings. <sup>22</sup> All God's people here send you greetings, **especially those who belong to Caesar's household.**

<sup>23</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Paul is under house-arrest but he still has great influence in delivering the Gospel – *“God's people in Rome greet you – especially those in the emperor's household”!!*

Two weeks ago the Gospel reading was from Matthew – his account of how Jesus called the first disciples. We saw that Mark has a near identical account to Matthew and that there are similarities and differences in Luke's account.

We asked if these first disciples knew Jesus. This account in Luke would suggest an answer of yes to that question or at very least they knew of Jesus from his crowd drawing teaching.

Jesus chooses Simon's boat as his 'pulpit' and after teaching tells Simon to put out into deeper water and let down the net for a catch. Simon starts his answer/objection with **“Master”** – because he knew Jesus or simply because of his status as an accomplished teacher and healer? Looking back in the preceding chapter we read, in sequence: Jesus teaching and healing in

Capernaum on the Sabbath; leaving the synagogue and **going to Simon's house where he heals the latter's mother-in-law**; withdrawing to a quiet spot where he is pursued by the crowds; preaching in the synagogues of Judea.

Simon certainly 'knew' Jesus. He, as a professional fisherman, voices an objection to start fishing again – they have caught nothing all night – **“but because you say so, I will let down the nets”**. We know the outcome – not only does he have a boat load of fish but so do his partners, James and John.

<sup>8</sup>When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!'

<sup>9</sup>For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, <sup>10</sup>and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.' <sup>11</sup>So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Simon Peter is always impetuous but he does know when he is in the wrong. Jesus ignores the request to go away from the sinful Simon; instead he is called to become a 'fisher of men'. Looking at the translation above we read that Jesus spoke to Simon (is 'you' in the text singular or plural?) but 'they' pull their boats up the beach, leaving everything to follow Jesus. None of translations available in 'Bible Gateway' answer the question in brackets above – all have 'you' and 'they'.

This account, from the beginning of Jesus' Ministry, reminds us of a similar incident after the resurrection – recorded in John's gospel. Simon has decided to go fishing and five other disciples go with him for another fruitless overnight endeavour. The stranger on the shore tells them to throw the net to starboard – can he see the shoal of fish? There is no arguing this time, the net goes in and a large catch made. It is John who realises the man on the shore is Jesus. When he tells Simon Peter, the latter – impetuous as ever – leaps overboard and swims to Jesus on the shore, the boat following behind.

We remember how this encounter with Jesus came to a conclusion – Jesus asking Simon **three times** if he really loved Him, and then commissioning him to “Feed My lambs, Feed My Sheep”.

I often wonder what Simon must have felt at that moment - we read that he was hurt to be asked the third time, it reminded him too closely of the three time denial before Jesus was crucified.

Some of you will have heard me take, as the subject for a sermon, “Three – a number significant to Peter and to Paul”. There was one other hugely significant reminder to Peter – the sheet of cloth containing ritually 'unclean' animals; the instruction to kill and eat; Peter's negative reaction as an orthodox Jew; the Lord's reply that nothing is impure that He has called clean.

Hugely significant? – While Peter is pondering the meaning of this vision, envoys come from Cornelius and the Spirit instructs him to accompany them without question. The Gospel is taken to the Gentiles and a second Pentecost is experienced by the household in Caesarea. Peter is called to Jerusalem to explain what has happened and the 'Church' leaders rejoice: (Acts 11:18)

<sup>18</sup>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.'

Paul we know suffered from some physical infirmity which interfered with his spreading of the Gospel. He pleaded with the Lord on three occasions that this should be taken away from him. Can you imagine the argument he used – “If only I didn't suffer in this way I could do so much more”. The reply is the same each time – “My grace is all you need”; when you are weak then I (the Lord) am strong.

Moses, Caleb and Joshua trusted the Lord and His promises. David suffered much in his early days when fleeing from the jealous and unpredictable Saul but he never lost his trust in the Lord. Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus had a confidence in the Lord that carried them through times of hardship and in Paul's case, imprisonment. Simon, a lowly fisherman was called to become a 'fisher of men'; renamed Peter, he became the Rock (petros) on which the new Christian 'Church' was built.

Called by Christ to be disciples  
every day in every place,  
we are not to hide as hermits  
but to spread the way of grace;  
citizens of heaven's kingdom,  
though this world is where we live,  
as we serve a faithful Master,  
faithful service may we give.

Richly varied are our pathways,  
many callings we pursue:  
may we use our gifts and talents  
always, Lord, to honour you;  
so in government or commerce,  
college, hospice, farm or home,  
whether volunteers or earning,  
May we see your kingdom come.

Hard decisions may confront us,  
urging us to compromise;  
still obedience is our watchword -  
make us strong and make us wise!  
Secular is turned to sacred,  
made a precious offering,  
as our daily lives are fashioned  
in submission to our King.

Martin Leckebusch