

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – Fourth Sunday in Lent (2nd Service)

Lectionary Readings: Exodus 6: 2-13
Psalms 13; 14
Romans 5: 1-11
John 12: 1-8

The reading from Exodus follows on directly from the reading last week; from Exodus 5:1 – 6:1; to Exodus 6: 2-13.

We read how Moses and Aaron had gone to Pharaoh with the request/demand that the ‘enslaved’ Israelite people be given three days respite to travel into the desert to sacrifice to the Lord.

The request was refused and as a consequence of the request having been made additional work conditions were imposed which caused distress and anger among the Israelites – they turn on, and blame, Moses and Aaron.

At the end of the reading last week we found Moses turning, questioningly, to the Lord:

God promises deliverance

²² Moses returned to the LORD and said, ‘Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me?’

²³ **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.’**

⁶¹ 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

The whole of the passage this week is a further dialogue between Moses and the Lord, broken at one point when Moses reports to the Israelites - who do not listen to him because of the harsh labour that has been brought upon them.

In the early verses, God tells Moses of past revelations and promises He has made:

² God also said to Moses, ‘I am the LORD. ³ I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them.

⁴ I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they resided as foreigners.

⁵ Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant.

In verse 3 the Lord says he appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as “God Almighty”. A footnote tells us the Hebrew words used are “*El-Shaddai*”. ‘El’ was a common title for God in the Ugaritic/Canaanite languages of the time but the origins of ‘Shaddai’ are unclear. There have been several suggestions as to the origin of ‘Shaddai’ – one of these gives ‘wilderness’ or ‘mountain’ as the meaning. God spoke to Moses from the burning bush – on the far side of the desert at Horeb, the mountain of God. We remember too, that later in the story of the Exodus, Moses encountered the Lord again on a mountain, Mount Sinai – spending forty days and nights in His presence. ‘El-Shaddai’ becomes a Biblical Title for ‘God Almighty’ where it is used seven times – 5 times in Genesis, once in Exodus and once in Ezekiel.

Verse 3 also contains a ‘strange’ statement – “*but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them.* (There is a possible alternative, but weaker (?) translation – “*and by my name the LORD did I not let myself be known to them?*”)

What does the verse in the main NIV text mean? A cross-reference takes us back to the Burning Bush and the Lord’s commission to Moses to lead His people out of Egypt: (Exodus 3: 14-15)

¹⁴ **God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.** This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “**I AM has sent me to you.**”

¹⁵ God also said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelites, “**The LORD**, the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you.”

‘This is my name for ever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.

A footnote in the NIV Study Bible has:

I AM WHO I AM (or *I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE*).

The name by which God wished to be known and worshipped in Israel – the name that expressed His character as the dependable and faithful God who desires the full trust of His people.

In Exodus 3:15 we read “**The LORD, the God of your fathers -**”; The Hebrew word used here is a familiar one – “*Yahweh*”, which means “**He is**” or “**He will be**”.

‘When God speaks of Himself He says “**I AM**”, and when we speak of Him we say “**He is**”. (NIV Study Bible)

After declaring His identity in our reading from Exodus 6, the Lord remembers the Covenant he made with Abraham etc. He goes on to tell Moses that the message to the Israelites is three-fold – He, God, (a) will bring them out from the ‘yoke’ of the Egyptians, (b) will free them from slavery and (c) will redeem them.

The promises of the Covenant are repeated and Moses goes again to tell the Israelites what God is promising - but they still refuse to listen to him.

Verses 10-12 record the Lord’s straightforward instruction to Moses:

“*Go, tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites go out of his country*”.

This instruction to Moses is the inspiration behind the song ‘Go down Moses’ – once thought to be a ‘Spiritual’ but probably its origins are more correctly associated with a group of escaped Southern State slaves (known as Contrabands), working with Union forces, during the American Civil War:

When Israel was in Egypt’s land,
Let My people go!
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let My people go!

Refrain:

*Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt’s land;
Tell old Pharaoh
To let My people go!*

No more shall they in bondage toil,
Let My people go!
Let them come out with Egypt’s spoil,
Let My people go!

Oh, let us all from bondage flee
Let My people go!
And let us all in Christ be free,
Let My people go!

You need not always weep and mourn,
Let My people go!
And wear these slav’ry chains forlorn,
Let My people go!

Your foes shall not before you stand,
Let My people go!
And you’ll possess fair Canaan’s land,
Let My people go!

There is a fine, rendition of this song, by Paul Robeson (with his magnificent ‘deep’ bass voice) on ‘YouTube’.

Once again we find Moses making excuses as to his inadequacies!

The reading last week ended with ‘God’s promises’; this week with ‘God’s instruction’:

¹³ Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron about the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he commanded them to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. (NIV)

¹³ And the LORD spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, and **gave them a charge** unto the children of Israel, and unto Pharaoh king of Egypt, to bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt. (King James -Authorised Version)

Two more short psalms this week; Psalm 13 and Psalm 14. Once again we look at the analyses of these psalms in the NIV Bible Commentary and in the Daily Study Bible.

Psalm 13: The NIV Commentary notes that “this psalm is classified as an *‘individual lament’*, but it is also expressive of the needs of the community of God’s people.” It may express the needs of the community but the text is focussed on the writer - on the individual. The NIV Commentary has as a ‘title’ for this psalm – “**Waiting for God’s Salvation**”; and it divides the text into three sections, each of two verses: I. “Expression of Despair: How Long?” (v. 1-2), II. “Expression of Prayer: Give Me Light!” (v. 3-4), III. “Expression of Hope and Trust: Let Me Sing!” (v. 5-6).

The Daily Study Bible also divides the text into three two verse sections – it observes that in the first two verses the question “How long?” occurs four times.

Matthew Henry in a preface to his commentary on the psalm (which he also divides into three sections) writes:

This psalm is the deserted soul’s case and cure. Whether it was penned on any particular occasion does not appear, but in general, I. David sadly complains that God had long withdrawn from him and delayed to relieve him (v. 1-2). II. He earnestly prays to God to consider his case and comfort him (v. 3-4). III. He assures himself of an answer of peace, and therefore concludes the psalm with joy and triumph, because he concludes his deliverance to be as good as wrought (v. 5-6).

The two opposite extremes of the psalmist’s experience are expressed in the first and last verses of the psalm:

¹ How long, LORD? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me?

⁶ I will sing the LORD’s praise, for he has been good to me.

Psalm 14: Given the heading “**God Deals with Foolish Evildoers**” in the NIV Commentary and divided into four distinct sections - I. “The Fool” (v. 1), II. “The Lord’s Perspective” (v. 2-3), III. “The Prophetic Perspective” (v. 4-6), IV. “The Hope of the Righteous” (v. 7).

The Daily Study Bible reminds us that the Book of Proverbs has a lot to say about “FOOLS”. Typically English has the economy of a single word but the Hebrew text in Proverbs has six separate words.

Arranged in what is believed to be an ascending scale of foolishness:

(a) A *pethi* is a silly ass, (b) a *kesil* is a stupid person, (c) the *ewil* is an idiot, (d) the *holel* a complete fool.

(e) The *nabhal* is actually impious and, (f) the *lets* is the sneerer, the arrogant free-thinker.

Our psalmist however feels no need to go beyond the fifth category. To his way of thinking to deny God’s love and care is the climax of imbecility. (Daily Study Bible)

The psalm is again categorised as an *‘individual lament’* but unlike Psalm 13, where the psalmist is writing about himself - his tussles and hopes - here the writer is lamenting the state of other individuals.

In verse 1 we read of ‘the fool’ saying “there is no God”, yet verse 5 says:

⁵ But there they are, overwhelmed with dread, for God is present in the company of the righteous.

The psalmist goes on to say:

⁶ You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge.

David then ends the psalm with “The Hope of the Righteous”:

⁷ Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When the LORD restores his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!

If we turn further on in the Book of Psalms, we find in psalm 53 a ‘revised’ version of psalm 14:

Psalm 53

¹The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’
They are corrupt, and their ways are vile; there is no one who does good.
²God looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.
³Everyone has turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.
⁴Do all these evildoers know nothing?
They devour my people as though eating bread; they never call on God.
⁵But there they are, overwhelmed with dread, where there was nothing to dread.
God scattered the bones of those who attacked you; you put them to shame, for God despised them.
⁶Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!
When God restores his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!

Psalm 14

¹The fool¹ says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’
They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.
²The LORD looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.
³All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.
⁴Do all these evildoers know nothing?
They devour my people as though eating bread; they never call on the LORD.
⁵But there they are, overwhelmed with dread, for God is present in the company of the righteous.
⁶You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge.
⁷Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!
When the LORD restores his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!

Paul is writing to the Romans about Faith, Hope and Peace. A footnote in the NIV tells us that where we read - “we have”, “we boast”, “we also glory” – many manuscripts have “let us” instead of “we”.

The opening verses of this chapter would therefore read:

¹Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, **let us** have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And **let us** boast in the hope of the glory of God.
³Not only so, but **let us** also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope.
⁵And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

This small change in vocabulary takes the focus from something that sounds accomplished to an on-going activity.

Paul goes on to tell us that as we journey through life, ‘setbacks’ – times when we feel isolated, that God is not with us – will come and if we persevere our characters will be enhanced. Our ‘Hope’ will grow – we remember that the very word ‘hope’ introduces an element of uncertainty, the mystery of ‘faith’ and Paul reminds us that we have been justified through ‘faith’ in Jesus Christ.

Later in the same letter he says: (Romans 8)

²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.
²³Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.
²⁴**For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.**
²⁶In the same way, **the Spirit helps us in our weakness.** We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.

It is the Holy Spirit that is working in our lives to fulfil this perseverance, character and ‘hope’:

⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts **through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.**

Charles Wesley had in his mind a passage from our reading when he penned some verses of this hymn on ‘the Gift and Work of the Holy Spirit’:

My God! I know, I feel Thee mine,
And will not quit my claim,
Till all I have is lost in Thine
And all renewed I am.

I hold Thee with a trembling hand,
But will not let Thee go,
Till steadfastly by faith I stand
And all Thy goodness know.

When shall I see the welcome hour
That plants my God in me -
Spirit of health, and life and power,
And perfect liberty?

Jesus, Thine all-victorious love
Shed in my heart abroad;
Then shall my feet no longer rove,
Rooted and fixed in God.

O that in me the sacred fire
Might now begin to glow,
Burn up the dross of base desire,
And make the mountains flow!

O that it now from heaven might fall,
And all my sins consume!
Come, Holy Ghost, for Thee I call,
Spirit of burning, come!

Refining fire, go through my heart,
Illuminate my soul;
Scatter Thy life through every part,
And sanctify the whole

This week there has been a much used and discussed phrase, made in the statement from Buckingham Palace following Harry and Meghan's interview with Oprah Winfrey in the United States – "While some recollections may vary".

John in his Gospel describes one of the occasions when Jesus came into contact with Martha and Mary at Bethany. Recollections have varied between the Gospel writers – in itself a good indication of authenticity; this is not some exact, identical, story but an event or events remembered by different people.

Martha is mentioned 13 times in the Gospels – 4 times in Luke and 9 times in John. Looking at John's Gospel we find 8 of the references in chapter 11 - the account of news reaching Jesus telling Him that Lazarus is sick, his delay in going to Bethany and the subsequent raising of Lazarus from the tomb. The final reference is in our reading today:

¹Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

²Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him.

After Jesus had delayed, Lazarus died, then news came to Bethany that He was coming – Martha went out to meet and almost confront Him, Mary stayed at home.

²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

²¹'Lord,' Martha said to Jesus, 'if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'

(She does go on to say that she knows God will answer any request of Jesus)

There was a clear difference in the nature of the two sisters - Martha was 'domestic' and served at the dinner in John 12. Luke similarly describes the difference between Martha and Mary: (Luke 10)

³⁸As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.

³⁹She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.

⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!'

⁴¹'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴²but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'

Our reading, which has an NIV heading of '**Jesus anointed at Bethany**', goes on to describe an event at the meal where Mary takes an expensive perfume, pours it over Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair.

The other Gospel writers have similar but significantly different accounts of this anointing. The NIV Study Bible has a footnote to the passage in Luke – suggesting that the anointing recorded in John may have been a separate event.

There are so many similarities that different views of the same event are most likely.

Matthew records the event, in Bethany, almost at the end of Jesus' time on earth: (Matthew 26)

⁶While Jesus was in Bethany **in the home of Simon the Leper**, ⁷a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she **poured on his head** as he was reclining at the table.

⁸**When the disciples saw this, they were indignant.** 'Why this waste?' they asked. ⁹'This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.'

Mark similarly places the anointing in Bethany, and again just before that final Passover Festival: (Mark 14)

¹Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him.

²'But not during the festival,' they said, 'or the people may riot.'

³While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table **in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman** came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. **She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.**

⁴Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, 'Why this waste of perfume? ⁵It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor.' And they rebuked her harshly.

The accounts in Matthew and Mark are very similar but Luke places the anointing early in the ministry of Jesus. There are also one or two other interesting twists in this story! (Luke 7)

⁶When one of the **Pharisees** invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ⁷**A woman in that town who lived a sinful life** learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. ⁸**As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.**

³⁹When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner.'

⁴⁰Jesus answered him, '**Simon**, I have something to tell you.' 'Tell me, teacher,' he said.

⁴¹Two people owed money to a certain money-lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?'

⁴³Simon replied, 'I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.' 'You have judged correctly,' Jesus said.

⁴⁴Then he turned towards the woman and said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

⁴⁵You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet.

⁴⁶You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.

⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.’

⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’

⁴⁹ The other guests began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’

⁵⁰ Jesus said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’

We note that the objections which have been raised in Mark are by “some of those present” and those in Matthew by “the disciples”. It is only John who directs the objections to Judas Iscariot who he explains is a thief – strange perhaps that such a person should be ‘the keeper of the money bag’.

In Matthew, Mark and John we have Jesus rebuking the critics and reminding them that the poor will always be with them:

(Deuteronomy 15:11)

¹¹ There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.

In Luke we have Jesus addressing the woman – “Your sins are forgiven” and “Your faith has saved you, go in peace”.

I know you love an offering
That’s costly, outreaching,
Touching Your heart for the poor.
The songs we sing as our offerings
Are more fragrant in Your presence,
If we live a life of love.

*And as we follow Your heart,
We are led to the lost,
Finding there a place of praise,
No matter what the cost.
So we will stand with the weak,
Give our most to the least,
Serving you with all we have,
Your Kingdom, God, we seek.*

Now I see what You command:
Be faithful and humble,
Putting selfish hopes aside.
So change my heart that I may love
My neighbour as my brother,
And to live a life of love.

David Gate