

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – Fifth Sunday in Lent (2nd Service)
(First Sunday of the Passion)

Lectionary Readings: **Exodus 7: 8-24**
 Psalm 34: 1-10 (11-22)
 Romans 5: 12-21
 Luke 22: 1-13

The Old Testament Reading last week came mainly from Exodus 6 and focussed on Moses in communion with the Lord. It ended with a single verse (13) following the heading (in NIV) of **“Family record of Moses and Aaron”**.

From verse 14 we see listed the heads of families; concluding in verse 25 by stating “These were the heads of the Levite families, clan by clan.”

Chapter 6 comes to an end after verse 30 but the text in context runs through into chapter 7:

²⁶ It was this Aaron and Moses to whom the LORD said, ‘Bring the Israelites out of Egypt by their divisions.’

²⁷ They were the ones who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt about bringing the Israelites out of Egypt – this same Moses and Aaron.

Aaron to speak for Moses

²⁸ Now when the LORD spoke to Moses in Egypt, ²⁹ he said to him, ‘I am the LORD. Tell Pharaoh king of Egypt everything I tell you.’

³⁰ But Moses said to the LORD, ‘Since I speak with faltering lips, why would Pharaoh listen to me?’

7 Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. ² You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. ³ **But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, ⁴ he will not listen to you.** Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites.

⁵ And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it.’

⁶ Moses and Aaron did just as the LORD commanded them.

⁷ Moses was eighty years old and Aaron eighty-three when they spoke to Pharaoh.

It appears that this could be a ‘second writer source’ as Moses has already had a discussion with the Lord, on similar lines, during his ‘vision of the Burning Bush’ (chapter 4). Moses and Aaron have already been to Pharaoh (chapter 5) resulting in the Israelites being instructed to make ‘bricks without provided straw’.

This week we move forward in time to two of the ‘miraculous signs’ that Moses performed before Pharaoh his staff turning into a snake when thrown on the ground and turning the waters of the Nile into blood.

How do you react when you read this passage? Is it factual or an imaginative creation? I know we will have some Christians who believe every word of Scripture as infallible, others will seek rational and practical explanations.

Aaron’s staff cast on the ground – becoming a snake (The Lord had told Moses to do this with his staff at the time of the ‘Burning Bush’; then to pick the snake up by the tail when it becomes a staff again). I think I am most troubled by the apparent ability of Pharaoh’s ‘wise men and sorcerers’ to do the same – I do however like the account of Aaron’s staff swallowing up these other staffs!

Then we come to the waters of the Nile being turned to blood. I was quite surprised to read in the NIV Bible Commentary (which I thought might take a very ‘conservative’ view) the following rational explanation:

Some scholars suggest that since all the plagues followed a natural cycle and all happened in one year, this first plague could be connected with an unusually high Nile flood in July and August. The sources for the Nile’s inundation (now controlled by the Aswan Dam) are the equatorial rains that fill the White Nile, which originates in east-central Africa (present day Uganda – my photograph is of the Murchison Falls, on the Nile and about 50 miles from where I taught in Uganda.) and flows sluggishly through swamps in eastern Sudan, and the Blue Nile and the Atbara River, which both fill with melting snow from the Ethiopian Highlands and become raging torrents filled with tons of red soil from the basins of both these rivers. (The two branches of the Nile join at Khartoum. The Atbara River or Black Nile joins further downstream at Atbara.) The higher the inundation, the deeper the colour of the red waters. In addition to this discolouration, a type of algae, known as flagellates, comes from the Sudan swamps along the White Nile, which produces the stench and the deadly fluctuations in the oxygen level of the river that proves to be so fatal to the fish. Such a process, at the command of God, seems to be the case for this first plague rather than any chemical change of the water into blood. Unlike other plagues and in agreement with this natural phenomenon, the plague did not stop suddenly. This change affected the “streams” (Herodotus describes seven branches of the Nile), the canals (to irrigate the fields), the ponds (left from the overflowing Nile), and the reservoirs (artificially made to store water for later use).



If I was troubled by the ‘wise men and sorcerers’ turning their staffs into snakes I am more troubled by the suggestion that they also turned the Nile into blood. If Moses and Aaron had been really effective – there would have been no water left for them to ‘magic’ with a red colouration!!

The Commentary does provide an answer – it lies in the last verse of our reading:

²⁴ And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile to get drinking water, because they could not drink the water of the river.

By digging effective wells near the river, water from the latter filtered through the soil and became colourless again and drinkable. Perhaps it was some sleight of hand with this 'pure' water that enabled Pharaoh's 'men' to copy Moses and Aaron.

The Lord's messengers had delivered His message to Pharaoh - accompanied by these two miraculous signs but we read that, as promised, his heart was hardened:

²² But the Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts, **and Pharaoh's heart became hard; he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said.**

²³ Instead, he turned and went into his palace, and did not take even this to heart.

There were to be a further eight plagues (frogs, gnats, flies, a plague on livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness) and after each Pharaoh further hardened his heart. Then of course came the final 'Plague on the Firstborn' and Pharaoh, having lost his first born son, finally let the Israelites go, but even then he changed his mind after the event and pursued them to his army's end in the Red Sea.

Just one (longer) psalm this week, attributed to David (**Of David. When he pretended to be insane before Abimelek, who drove him away and he left**); possibly the event recorded in 1 Samuel 21, although the king's name is different:

David at Gath

¹⁰ That day David fled from Saul and went to **Achish** king of Gath. ¹¹ But the servants of Achish said to him, 'Isn't this David, the king of the land? Isn't he the one they sing about in their dances:

"Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands"?'

¹² **David took these words to heart and was very much afraid of Achish king of Gath.**

¹³ **So he feigned insanity in their presence; and while he was in their hands he acted like a madman, making marks on the doors of the gate and letting saliva run down his beard.**

¹⁴ Achish said to his servants, 'Look at the man! He is insane! Why bring him to me? ¹⁵ Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me? Must this man come into my house?'

The psalm is once again in the form of an acrostic, based on the Hebrew alphabet. The NIV Commentary states that it is generally categorized as an *individual thanksgiving hymn*, but the wisdom element (v. 8-22) may well argue in favour of it being a *wisdom psalm*. Two basic themes unfold: Thanksgiving and Wisdom.

Verse 1 is a personal statement of praise as is the first half of verse 2 which is followed by a general appeal for 'others':

¹ I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.

² I will glory in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice.

Verse 3 finds the psalmist exhorting 'others' to join him in praising the Lord.

He then moves on in the next four verses to declare what the Lord, when sought, has done (a) for him personally and (b) for those who look or call to Him.

Verse 8 commences with very familiar words – the psalmist is encouraging more and more people to turn to the Lord:

⁸ **Taste and see that the LORD is good**; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

⁹ Fear the LORD, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing.

¹⁰ The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

These verses conclude the 'set' part of the Lectionary Psalm – the remaining 12 verses are 'optional'. In verse 11 the psalmist calls on 'his children' – to listen to him and they will learn 'the fear of the Lord'; in the next three verses he encourages the actions of those who want to do the right thing – turning from evil to good.

The remaining 8 verses are divided into four pairs. Verses 15 and 16 remind us that the Lord is looking over His people – seeing the righteous, hearing their cry; but far from those who do not acknowledge Him and follow their own evil ways. Verses 17-18 and 19-20 reminds us that the Lord cares for and looks after the 'righteous'. The picture of a 'righteous' person held by the psalmist was of course that of the Old Testament – one who kept or strived to keep the Law. This is in contrast to the New Testament picture of the 'redeemed' which we will see again in the Epistle for this week.

The psalm ends with two statements – the fate of the wicked and the Lord's care for His servants:

²¹ Evil will slay the wicked; the foes of the righteous will be condemned.

²² **The LORD will rescue his servants; no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.**

The Epistle for this week is taken from Paul's letter to the Romans - Chapter 5, verses 12-21. This seems to be a surprising choice as the reading for the equivalent service on the First Sunday in Lent was Romans 5: 12-19!!

The following was the comment on that passage made at the time:

Which brings us to Paul's letter to the Romans. Sin entered the world through one man, Adam. Sin continues to enter the world every day when we as members of the human race (the 'descendants' of Adam) follow those of our own interests and desires that are contrary to the Will of God.

Paul argues initially from his 'academic' background as a Pharisee – sin existed before the Law was given (from Adam to Moses) but a person could only become 'guilty' when the Law was revealed and in place. He then goes on to Make a contrast with God's grace:

¹⁵ But the gift is not like the trespass. **For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!**

¹⁶ Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man's sin: the judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification.

¹⁷ For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!

At this early stage in Lent 2021, as we prepare to celebrate the Sacrifice of the Cross and the triumph of the Easter Day Resurrection, may we reflect again on the thought that "Human desire and will bring death, life only comes through Jesus".

*Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
o'er the world's tempestuous sea;
guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,
for we have no help but Thee,
yet possessing every blessing
if our God our Father be.*

*Saviour, breathe forgiveness o'er us;
all our weakness Thou dost know,
Thou didst tread this earth before us,
Thou didst feel its keenest woe;
tempted, taunted, yet undaunted,
Through the desert Thou didst go.*

*Spirit of our God, descending,
fill our hearts with heavenly joy,
love with every passion blending,
pleasure that can never cloy;
thus provided, pardoned, guided,
nothing can our peace destroy.*

James Edmeston

On this Fifth Sunday we have the addition of verses 20 and 21:

²⁰ The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more,

²¹ so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The first of these verses takes us back to Paul's 'academic' argument that sin existed before the Law was given but 'mankind' was only guilty after the Law had been introduced.

It is an interesting thought that as sin increased so **grace increased all the more**. The consequence of sin is death but we are told "grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord".

We meet the word 'righteousness' for the second time this week, but now in its New Testament context.

The appointed Gospel describes two of the narratives leading us to events in the life of Jesus, immediately before that final Passover Festival.

The first of these – '**Judas agreeing to betray Jesus**' is recorded in all three of the Synoptic Gospels but not in that attributed to John. We might have expected the latter Gospel to have carried this event bearing in mind what we read in John's Gospel last week – the reaction to Mary pouring expensive ointment on Jesus' feet: (John 12)

⁴ But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected,

⁵ 'Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages

⁶ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

There is the reference to Judas later betraying Jesus but a later passage in John's Gospel would suggest betrayal did not become a reality until a supper just before Passover although clearly the idea was forming in his mind: (John 13)

¹ It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

² The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus.

Jesus predicts his betrayal

¹⁸ 'I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfil this passage of Scripture:

"He who shared my bread has turned (*lifted up his heel*) against me." (Psalm 41:9)

¹⁹ 'I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am who I am.

²⁰ Very truly I tell you, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me.'

²¹ After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, 'Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me.'

²² His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. ²³ One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. ²⁴ Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, 'Ask him which one he means.'

²⁵ Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, 'Lord, who is it?'

²⁶ Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.'

Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.

²⁷ As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.

So Jesus told him, 'What you are about to do, do quickly.'²⁸ But no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. ²⁹ Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor. ³⁰ As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.

Have you ever wondered what motive or motives led Judas to betray Jesus?

In the words of Jesus, above, it was fulfilling a prophecy in Scripture.

There was a moment, we are told in John and in Luke, when Satan entered into Judas.

Money was the motive for all four Gospel writers – three have Judas negotiating a ‘blood price’ with the chief priests (and also the officers of the Temple guard in Luke); John has previously described Judas as a thief.

Judas Iscariot – what is the meaning of that ‘surname’? Many scholars read this name as ‘a man of Kerioth’; ‘a man of the city’; or even ‘a city slicker’.

The editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica believe it is likely to be a corruption of the Latin word ‘*sicarius*’ – a murderer or assassin, which suggests he would have belonged to the Sicarii, the most radical Jewish group, some of whom were terrorists. Was there, perhaps, a political motive – did Judas expect Jesus to stand up to the authorities; to reveal himself as the Messiah; to overthrow the Romans and establish the Kingdom of God? Probably a fanciful idea as John 6 suggests it was ‘just’ a family name:

⁶⁶ From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

⁶⁷ ‘You do not want to leave too, do you?’ Jesus asked the Twelve.

⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

⁶⁹ We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.’

⁷⁰ Then Jesus replied, ‘Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!’

⁷¹ (He meant Judas, **the son of Simon Iscariot**, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.)

The second narrative – ‘**The Last Supper**’ – indicates that Jesus had made advance preparations to have a room available for sharing with His disciples the Passover Meal.

Luke tells us:

⁸ Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, ‘Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover.’

⁹ ‘Where do you want us to prepare for it?’ they asked.

¹⁰ He replied, ‘As you enter the city, **a man carrying a jar of water will meet you**. Follow him to the house that he enters, ¹¹ and say to the owner of the house,

“The Teacher asks: where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?”

¹² He will show you a large room upstairs, all furnished. Make preparations there.’

Given the current focus of the UK media (March 15th) I feel very reluctant to make any comment of my own on verse 10! – the following comes from the footnote for this verse in the NIV Study Bible:

“It was extraordinary to see a man carrying a jar of water, since this was normally women’s work.”

An extraordinary sight would have stood out and made it easy for Peter and John to find the right place.

Our passage today concludes in the next verse:

¹³ **They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.**

In these Lectionary Readings for the second service this is the point where we leave the preparation for Passover – next week (the last Sunday in Lent) we look at one ‘parable’ that Jesus told in those final days and the week after (Easter Sunday) we recount the story of two disciples trudging home during the evening of Easter Day to their home in Emmaus – making slow progress from Jerusalem until the risen Jesus joins them on the road. We will read of the same two disciples ‘rushing’ back to the disciples in Jerusalem with the news that **THEY HAVE SEEN JESUS**.

Christ is the world’s light, Christ and none other;
born in our darkness, He became our brother.
If we have seen Him, we have seen the Father:
glory to God on high.

Christ is the world’s Peace, Christ and none other;
no one can serve Him and despise another;
who else unites us, one in God the Father?
Glory to God on high.

**Christ is the world’s Life, Christ and none other;
sold once for silver, murdered here, our brother -
He, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father:
glory to God on high.**

Give God the glory, God and none other;
give God the glory, Spirit, Son, and Father;
give God the glory, God with us, my brother:
glory to God on high.

Fred Pratt Green