

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – Easter Day (2nd Service)

Lectionary Readings: Ezekiel 37: 1-14
Psalms 114 and 117
Luke 24: 13-35

A week ago our Old Testament reading reminded us of God's 'Plans' for His chosen people and how over the years and centuries they had turned their back on the Lord. The vineyard He had so carefully constructed produced 'bad fruit' although it had been planted with the best of grape vines – so poor was the yield, the vineyard was to be destroyed. An interpretation was given – the vineyard was Israel and the 'crop' of grapes the people of Judah.

Disaster did come to Israel in the form of conquest and exile – it was at this time, in Babylon, that Ezekiel performed his functions of priest and prophet.

During most of our lifetimes, the Middle East has been a hotbed of political intrigue and discontent. It is nothing new and led millennia ago to the destruction of the Jewish States of Israel and Judah. Out of interest I have, this week, been looking at the background to the Exile – that time when Ezekiel was serving his people.

The then dominant power in the Middle East was Assyria, a megapower who subjugated many smaller nations, turning them into vassal states or destroying them completely. Ahaz, the king of Judah, was in dispute with his neighbours – they wanted to form an alliance against Assyria - and called for support from the ruling power. As a result the kingdom of Israel was overthrown (around 720BC) but consequentially Judah became no more than a vassal state of Assyria. Ahaz was succeeded by his son Hezekiah – a righteous king who reigned for 29 years. Both Isaiah and Micah prophesied during his reign. He in his turn was succeeded by his son (Manasseh, reigned 55 years) and then his grandson (Amon, reigned 2 years only). Both of these kings were renowned for their idolatrous practices, so great by the time of Amon that there was a revolt which led to his death.

This brings us to his son – Josiah, another king who walked in the way of the Lord. He reigned for 31 years and during that time started repair work on the temple. During this work the hidden Book of the Law of Moses was discovered and acted upon; leading to the destruction of many of the sites where Baal was worshipped. Unfortunately the practices of Manasseh and Amon were so ingrained; the reforms of Josiah had little effect on the people as a whole.

In the time of Josiah the Mosaic Covenant was remembered. In Leviticus chapter 26, the first fourteen verses record "*Reward for Obedience*" verse 15 forward "*Punishment for Disobedience*". The Mosaic Covenant is also given in chapters 28 and 29 of Deuteronomy. We see a similar pattern – verses 1-14 of chapter 28 promise "*Blessings for Obedience*" and 15-68 "*Curses for Disobedience*" - Chapter 29 goes onto "*Renewal of the Covenant*".

In the context of what is to befall Judah we turn to Deut. 28: 58-64:

⁵⁸ If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name – the LORD your God – ⁵⁹ the LORD will send fearful plagues on you and your descendants, harsh and prolonged disasters, and severe and lingering illnesses. ⁶⁰ He will bring on you all the diseases of Egypt that you dreaded, and they will cling to you. ⁶¹ The LORD will also bring on you every kind of sickness and disaster not recorded in this Book of the Law, until you are destroyed.

⁶² You who were as numerous as the stars in the sky will be left but few in number, because you did not obey the LORD your God.

⁶³ **Just as it pleased the LORD to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you.**
You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess.

⁶⁴ **Then the LORD will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other.**
There you will worship other gods – gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your ancestors have known.

Assyria was the dominant power but another was rising – Neo-Babylon, leading to the capture on Nineveh in 612BC. Some of the fallen Assyrian army retreat towards Egypt where they remain as a force under Ashurbanipal II. In 609BC Pharaoh Necho sends an Egyptian army to aid the remaining Assyrians in their struggle with Babylon.

Josiah tries to stop them at Megiddo – he is unfortunately killed during the battle and is succeeded (for the grand total of 3 months) by his pro-Babylonian son Jehoahaz who was deposed by Pharaoh Necho and replaced by Josiah's second son, Jehoiakim (reigned 11 years) who is pro-Egypt in allegiance.

Now the politics really begin!

After the Babylonians defeat the Assyrians at the battle of Carchemish in 605BC and then besiege Jerusalem, Jehoiakim switches his allegiance to Babylon but when they fail to invade Egypt in 601BC he switches his allegiance back to Egypt. Three years later Nebuchadnezzar invades Judah and besieges Jerusalem for 3 months – during this time Jehoiakim dies of natural causes. He is succeeded by his son Jehoiachin who lasts 3 months and 10 days on the throne before being deposed by Nebuchadnezzar for fear of his being a 'focus' for revolt. According to the Babylonian Chronicles:

The seventh year (of Nebuchadnezzar – 598 BC.) in the month Chislev (Nov/Dec) the king of Babylon assembled his army, and after he had invaded the land of Hatti (Syria/Palestine) he laid siege to the city of Judah. On the second day of the month of Adar (16 March) he conquered the city and took the king (Jeconiah/*Jehoiachin*) prisoner. He installed in his place a king (Zedekiah) of his own choice, and after he had received rich tribute, he sent (them) forth to Babylon

And so we come to the final king of Judah – Zedekiah, a vassal of Babylon. He reigned for 11 years but ultimately rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar (588-586) which led to the sacking of Jerusalem, the burning of the temple and yet more people sent into Exile in Babylon - Judah reduced to the status of a province, no longer a kingdom.

From the opening verses of Ezekiel it is clear that his family had been transported to Babylon along with king Jehoiachin and not, 11 years later when Jerusalem was raised to the ground: (Ezekiel 1: 1-3)

Ezekiel's inaugural vision

¹ In my thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the River Kebar, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

² On the fifth of the month – it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin – ³ the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the River Kebar in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the LORD was on him.

Isaiah was able to place the vision that started his time as a prophet – “*In the year that King Uzziah died*”; Ezekiel is even more precise, giving year, month and day.

The NIV Study Bible notes refer to Numbers 4: 3:

³ Count all the men from thirty to fifty years of age who come to serve in the work at the tent of meeting.

The Study Bible goes on to say:

A person entered the Levitical priesthood in his 30th year. Denied the priesthood in exile, Ezekiel received another commission – that of prophet. The *Kebar River* was a canal of the Euphrates near the city of Nippur, south of Babylon, and possibly a place of prayer for the exiles. (see Psalm 137: 1 – “*By the rivers of Babylon*” - and compare with Paul going outside Philippi to the riverside in Acts 16: 13 – the conversion of Lydia).

During his lifetime as a prophet Ezekiel experienced many, many visions. One of the most dramatic must be the one described in our Lectionary Reading today - “The valley of dry bones”. Last week the passage from Isaiah and the Gospel focussed on God creating a magnificent vineyard. The people of Judah turn from the Lord and ruin the vineyard resulting in its destruction – both Israel and Judah have been taken into captivity, their kingdoms destroyed. In the New Testament reading the Lord’s people fail to recognise His Son – the religious leaders are challenged for their lack of effective leadership. There is the promise of the vineyard passing to others – the Gospel extended to the gentiles.

The contrasting vision of Ezekiel, at a time when the ‘vineyard’ has been destroyed is one of hope. It would appear from verse 11 that the people were again looking to the Lord and He gives to them a magnificent promise:

¹¹ Then he said to me: ‘Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.”

¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them: “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel.

¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them.

¹⁴ **I will put my Spirit in you and you will live**, and I will settle you in your own land.

Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.”

As we read this vision received by the prophet so many years ago in, for him, unusual and difficult circumstances, may we know as a reality in our lives the same promise that the Lord gave to Judah – “***I will put my Spirit in you and you will live***”.

It is fitting to remember new life and breath coming to the dry bones in the valley, the restoration of God’s people, as we celebrate again this Day of Resurrection.

Within the Book of Psalms there are three collections of *Hallel* (Praise) psalms. Numbers 113-118 make up the “Egyptian Hallel”; numbers 120-136 the “Great Hallel” and 146-150 the “Concluding Hallel” psalms. The NIV Bible Commentary elaborates on this information:

The Hallel psalms had a significant part in the “praise” of the Lord. The Egyptian Hallel and the Great Hallel were sung during the annual feasts (Leviticus 23; Numbers 10:10). **The Egyptian Hallel psalms received a special place in the Passover liturgy**, as 113-114 were recited or sung before and 115-118 after the festive meal (cf. Matthew 26:30; Mark 14: 26).

It is therefore appropriate on Easter Day – following Jesus’ celebration of the Passover with His disciples that we have two of these Egyptian Hallel psalms – one sung before and one after the meal.

The first two verses of Psalm 114 celebrate God’s Covenant people led out of Egypt. We note the use of Judah and of Israel and remember how Isaiah, a prophet in the kingdom of Judah, had his vision of the vineyard (Israel) and the vines (the people of Judah). The next four verses are described in the Bible Commentary as “The Witness of Nature” – they all refer to some natural event during the Exodus. Questions are asked in verses 5 and 6:

⁵ Why was it, sea, that you fled? Why, Jordan, did you turn back?

⁶ Why, mountains, did you leap like rams, you hills, like lambs?

The answer is provided in verse 7 – “*at the presence of the Lord*”. This is the presence and power of the Covenant God of Judah and Israel – the very earth should tremble.

We remember the ‘grumbling’ Israelites who had left Egypt, ‘moaning’ to Moses and Aaron whenever there was an opportunity. The final verse of the psalm reminds us of two such occasions when the Israelites were complaining for lack of water and the Lord provided from the rock (Exodus 17). Linguists tell us that this was not a one off event in the past – a literal translation would be rendered as *‘The Lord continues to turn the rock into a pool etc.’*. The use of the present continuous tense reminds us of that New Testament phrase *“be filled with the Holy Spirit”* (Ephesians 5: 18) which again sounds like a one-off event instead of the ‘literal’ translation of the Greek - *“go on being filled with the Holy Spirit”*.

Psalm 117 – at 2 verses, the shortest in the Psalter – is purely a psalm of praise:

¹ Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples.

² For great is his love towards us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures for ever.

Praise the LORD. (Hallelu Yah)

We note in verse 1 that the psalmist is looking beyond Israel and Judah – there is a call to all nations to praise the Lord. What an appropriate psalm for Jesus and the disciples to sing after the ‘Last Supper’ meal before they go out to the Garden of Gethsemane and the events of that first Easter weekend.

Paul writes to the Roman Christians about *‘The Weak and the Strong’*. At the beginning of Romans chapter 15 we find:

¹We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. ² Each of us should please our neighbours for their good, to build them up.

Later in the chapter he goes on to say:

⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews^{as} on behalf of God’s truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed ⁹ and, moreover, **that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy**. As it is written:

‘Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;

I will sing the praises of your name.’ (2 Samuel 22:50; Psalm 18:49)

¹⁰ Again, it says,

‘Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people.’ (Deuteronomy 32:43)

¹¹ And again,

‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him. (Psalm 117:1)

Verse 1 is an exhortation to ‘all nations’ to praise the Lord; verse 2 commences “for” and offers the explanation of His love and enduring faithfulness – which we remember particularly at this time in the Christian year.

The Gospel takes us to the afternoon(?) of that first Easter Day – two followers, only one known by name, making their way home from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Can you picture the ‘video action’? –slow trudging steps, no hurry, their hopes and expectations have been shattered. They are joined on the road by a stranger who asks what they are discussing.

I love the **New English Bible** translation of what happened next: (Luke 24: 17)

¹⁶As they talked and discussed it with one another, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but something kept them from seeing who it was. ¹⁷He asked them, ‘What is it you are debating as you walk?’

They halted, their faces full of gloom, and one, called Cleopas, answered (NEB)

Looking at various translations of verse 17 we read various descriptions of their feelings - sad, discouraged, broken-hearted, gloomy, downcast, long-faced; sad or sadness being the most common.

To me the NEB description of **“faces full of gloom”** gives a better picture of their depression and confusion.

They explain, to the new travel companion their shattered hopes and the confused rumours that are circulating about Jesus being alive.

The stranger tells them they have been slow in understanding many, many Messianic prophecies – he goes on to take them through the Scriptures about Jesus in Moses and in all of the Prophets. As they were to say later that evening:

³² ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’ (NIV)

³² ‘Did we not feel our hearts on fire as he talked with us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?’ (NEB)

Arriving at Emmaus this ‘new’ travel companion makes as if to continue his journey but is offered typical Middle Eastern hospitality and goes in to stay with Cleopas and the other, unknown, follower.

It is only when the guest takes bread, gives thanks, breaks and starts to distribute it that He is recognised as Jesus.

At that point He disappears!

In verse 33 we read how they set out back to Jerusalem – were they plodding, faces full of gloom again? I suspect the answer to that question is a very definite NO; the world record for 7 miles may well have been smashed that evening!!

³³ They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together ³⁴ and saying, ‘It is true!

The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.’

³⁵ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread.

(NIV)

³³Without a moment's delay they set out and returned to Jerusalem. There they found that the Eleven and the rest of the company had assembled, and ³⁴were saying, 'It is true: the Lord has risen; he has appeared to Simon.'

³⁵Then they gave their account of the events of their journey and told how he had been recognised by them at the breaking of the bread. (NEB)

The witnesses to the resurrection were increasing – first it was the women at the tomb, told by the angels that He was risen; then it was Simon Peter who ran to the tomb, found it empty but sometime later in the day encountered Jesus as did our two travellers on the road to Emmaus.

Reading on in Luke's Gospel (the Lectionary Reading two weeks from today) we find Jesus appearing to the Eleven, the rest of the company and the Emmaus pair who have just returned to Jerusalem – His first appearance to a group of people.

They were, at first, startled and frightened by Jesus' sudden appearance; I am sure those feelings rapidly changed to ones of joy and exultation.

With confidence, we take up the Easter cry - In the Orthodox tradition it is also an Easter greeting between believers:

Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

Low in the grave He lay,
Jesus my Saviour:
Waiting the coming day,
Jesus, my Lord.

*Up from the grave He arose,
With a mighty triumph o'er His foes;
He arose a victor from the dark domain,
And He lives for ever with His saints to reign:
He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!*

Vainly they watch His bed,
Jesus, my Saviour;
Vainly they seal the dead,
Jesus, my Lord.

Death cannot keep his prey,
Jesus, my Saviour;
He tore the bars away,
Jesus, my Lord.

Robert Lowry

Jesus Christ is risen today,
Hallelujah!
Our triumphant holy day,
Hallelujah!
Who did once upon the Cross,
Hallelujah!
Suffer to redeem our loss,
Hallelujah!

Hymns of praises let us sing,
Unto Christ our heavenly King,
Who endured the Cross and grave,
Sinners to redeem and save:

But the pain, which He endured,
Our salvation hath procured;
Now above the sky He's King,
Where the angels ever sing:

Sing we to our God above,
Praise eternal as His love,
Praise Him, all ye heavenly host,
Father, Son and Holy Ghost!

*Anonymous: Lyra Davidica, 1708
translated from 14th Century MS.*