

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

Lectionary Readings: Isaiah 26: 1-9, 19

Psalms 143: 1-11

Luke 24: 1-12

Have you had that experience of coming across an unknown word, looking it up in the dictionary to find the instruction – see ‘xxxxx’? When you turn to ‘xxxxx’ it instructs you to see the original word!

There is a variation to this – the initial instruction may be to see ‘xxxxx’; when that word is consulted there is a further instruction to see ‘yyyyy’ and from there it goes on – see ‘zzzzz’ etc!!

Isaiah is a little like the second illustration – right at the beginning of our reading today we read:

In that day this song will be sung *in the land of Judah*

The NIV Study Bible footnotes for this verse refer us first to chapter 12 (verses 1 and 4):

¹In that day you will say:

‘I will praise you, LORD. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me.

⁴In that day you will say:

‘Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted.

It then goes on to make reference to chapter 24, verse 21 and then chapter 25, verse 9:

²⁴²¹ In that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below.

²⁵⁹ In that day they will say,

‘Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.’

What is “**this day**”? The footnote sends us to look at chapter 10, verses 20 and 27:

The remnant of Israel

²⁰ In that day the remnant of Israel, the survivors of Jacob, will no longer rely on him who struck them down but will truly rely on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel.

²⁷ In that day their burden will be lifted from your shoulders, their yoke from your neck; the yoke will be broken because you have grown so fat.

The clue is in the reference to “the remnant of Israel”, “the survivors of Jacob”. In the first verse of our reading today the song will be sung “*in the land of Judah*”. We know that Isaiah had his commissioning vision when the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah existed. It was about 20 years later that the Assyrians conquered Israel – Isaiah warned of the eventual exile of Judah to Babylon.

We remember the passage from Isaiah 5, our reading two weeks ago – “The Song of the Vineyard”. Creation is perfect but the fruit of the vineyard (described as the people of Judah) are corrupt and evil; they will be destroyed.

In the reading today we see the opposite; a prophecy of reconciliation in the future – it is headed “A song of praise or “The Remnant of Israel” depending on the NIV version consulted and is often seen as heralding the coming Messianic Age.

If we move on 15 verses we come to the beginning of chapter 11 - very well known words which are often heard as a public reading during Advent:

The branch from Jesse

¹ A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

² The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD –

³ and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears;

⁴ but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

⁵ Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash round his waist.

Our Lectionary Reading ends with the solitary verse 19:

¹⁹ But your dead will live, LORD; their bodies will rise – let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy – your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead.

The NIV Study Bible links verse 19 to the Old Testament reading that we shared from Ezekiel last week – “The Valley of Dry Bones” – it is a reference to the restoration of Israel. A more tentative link – perhaps including the resurrection of the body - is made to Daniel 12 verse 2:

² Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.

Over this Easter Period we may well have read Matthew's account of the death of Jesus with verses 52-53 in chapter 27 unique to this gospel and perhaps symbolic of Christ's conquering death through His redemptive work on the Cross:

The death of Jesus

⁴⁵ From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. ⁴⁶ About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?').

⁴⁷ When some of those standing there heard this, they said, 'He's calling Elijah.'

⁴⁸ Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. ⁴⁹ The rest said, 'Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him.'

⁵⁰ And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

The earth shook, the rocks split ⁵² and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.

⁵³ **They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.**

We therefore see in this passage from Isaiah links to the Old Testament readings from the two preceding weeks and also one of the gospel accounts of the crucifixion and death of Jesus.

The introductory notes in the NIV Study Bible tell us that Psalm 143 is "a prayer for deliverance from enemies and for divine leading". It goes on to say that this is the seventh and final penitential psalm.

The introductory passage to the psalm, headed "**Lead Me on Level Ground**" in the NIV Bible Commentary, notes the numbers of the other penitential psalms; 6; 32; 51; 102 and 130. It also notes that the psalm is an *individual lament*.

In verse 1 the psalmist is appealing to the Lord – to come to the aid of His servant. There is reference to the faithfulness and righteousness of the Lord – the covenant promises of the Lord to His people. The writer is, however, very aware of personal shortcomings and prays that the Lord will not bring 'deserved' judgement:

² Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you. (NIV)

The Message, as expected, brings a more 'contemporary translation' of verses 1 and 2:

¹⁻² Listen to this prayer of mine, GOD; pay attention to what I'm asking.

Answer me—you're famous for your answers! Do what's right for me.

But don't, please don't, haul me into court; not a person alive would be acquitted there.

The next two verses are a lament for the situation in which the psalmist (David) finds himself – he is crushed by the enemy; it feels as though he is living in darkness, almost as though he is dead; his spirit grows faint and he is dismayed.

Verses 5 and 6 express thoughts and actions which we have seen in many of the psalms attributed to David. He remembers how things were; he meditates on all God's works, what He has done; he, David, spreads his hands to the Lord, his soul thirsts for the Lord.

He "remembers", "meditates" and "considers" the acts of God in creation and in the history of redemption. (NIV Bible Commentary)

David then appeals to the Lord to act for him and, as usual, expresses his confidence in the Lord:

⁷ Answer me quickly, LORD; my spirit fails.

Do not hide your face from me or I will be like those who go down to the pit.

⁸ Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for **I have put my trust in you.**

Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life.

In verse 10 he prays for guidance:

¹⁰ Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground.

There are two concluding verses to this psalm (11-12) – our reading today omits verse 12:

¹² In your unfailing love, silence my enemies; destroy all my foes, for I am your servant.

The NIV Study Bible commenting on "*destroy all my foes*" in this verse makes reference to a similar passage in Psalm 5 where there is a lengthy footnote (which probably explains verse 12's exclusion from the reading today!):

The presence of so-called "imprecations" (curses) in the Psalms has caused many Christians to wince, in view of Jesus' instructions to turn the other cheek and to pray for one's enemies (Matthew 5: 39, 44), and His own example on the Cross (Luke 23: 34). Actually these "imprecations" are not that at all; rather, they are appeals to God to redress wrongs perpetrated against the psalmists by imposing penalties commensurate with the violence done: (Psalm 28:4)

⁴ Repay them for their deeds and for their evil work;

repay them for what their hands have done and bring back on them what they deserve.

This is in accordance with normal judicial procedure in human courts: (Deuteronomy 25: 1-3)

When people have a dispute, they are to take it to court and the judges will decide the case, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty. ² If the guilty person deserves to be beaten, the judge shall make them lie down and have them flogged in his presence with the number of lashes the crime deserves, ³ but the judge must not impose more than forty lashes. If the guilty party is flogged more than that, your fellow Israelite will be degraded in your eyes.

The psalmists knew that he who has been wronged is not to right that wrong by his own hand but is to leave redress to the Lord who says *“It is mine to avenge; I will repay”* (Deuteronomy 32: 35). Therefore they appeal to the divine Judge.

In this psalm, as in most of the psalms of David, one is struck by the intensity with which he studies and concentrates on the law but above all the earnest way in which he seeks the Lord. How do our lives stand in comparison? – perhaps facing less obvious enemies leads to a general complacency.

Last week on Easter Day the gospel for the second service took us on the Emmaus road with the two followers of Jesus. Now one week later we return to the preceding passage in Luke – the experience of the women at the tomb early on that first day of the week which was of course Easter Day.

All four of the gospel writers record Joseph of Arimathea taking the body of Jesus to the tomb and also how one or more of the women who were followers of Jesus went early to the tomb the next morning.

The burial of Jesus (Luke 23: 50-56)

⁵⁰ Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, ⁵¹ who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea, and he himself was waiting for the kingdom of God.

⁵² Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. ⁵³ Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid.

⁵⁴ It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.

⁵⁵ The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. ⁵⁶ Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.

Mark in his gospel gives us a little more information:

The burial of Jesus (Mark 15: 42-47)

⁴² It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached,

⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body.

⁴⁴ Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. ⁴⁵ When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph.

⁴⁶ So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.

⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.

We remember that the Jewish Sabbath came to an end at sunset – trading then commenced and we are told:

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. (Mark 16:1)

The use of spices was not an example of embalming, common in some Middle Eastern States at the time, but as stated in the text they were used to anoint the body – an act showing devotion and love. It was a common practice - there was certainly no expectation of resurrection!

Matthew tells us that it was Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” (who he has already identified as Mary the mother of James and Joseph - Matthew 27:56) who went to the tomb early on the first day of the week; experienced an earthquake as the angel came to the tomb and rolled back the stone; were told by the angel that Jesus had risen and that they were to go to the disciples and tell them to go to Galilee where they would meet Jesus. Leaving the tomb they encounter Jesus Himself who repeats the instruction to His disciples –who do go to a specified mountain in Galilee where Matthew's gospel comes to a conclusion as Jesus gives His disciples the “Great Commission”.

Matthew is the only gospel writer to describe the guard that is set on the tomb by Pilate at the instigation of the chief priests and Pharisees; the paralysing fear that strikes the guards at the time of the ‘earthquake’; their report of events to the chief priests and the subsequent false story circulated about the body being taken by the disciples. We read that the guards were bribed to stay silent and a promise was made to ‘square’ things with Pilate if necessary).

In Mark it is Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James and Salome who go early to the tomb. This appears to be the only account in which the question ‘who will move the stone?’ is asked. They find the stone rolled away and a young man in a white robe sitting to one side – they were afraid. The message is the same as that in Matthew but they flee from the tomb so “*trembling and bewildered*” that they said “*nothing to anybody*”.

Manuscripts of Mark's gospel, produced in later years, have an additional section where Jesus meets first Mary Magdalene, then two walking in the country (to Emmaus?) who return to Jerusalem and last of all the eleven disciples. It would appear that some of this material has been extracted from the other gospel accounts

Luke does not, at first, specify which women went to the tomb, they are simply described as “*the women who had followed Him from Galilee*”. They find the stone rolled away and an empty tomb. While wondering about this “*two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them*” – they, in their turn, were fearful but were told “*He has risen!*” and were reminded of what He had told them back in Galilee:

⁷ “The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.”

⁸ Then they remembered his words.

In verses 10-12 some of the women are named and we read of the apostles’ reaction when given the news:

¹⁰ It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles.

¹¹ But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.

¹² Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

Luke then tells of the Emmaus Road and we remember it is after the two ‘followers’ have returned to Jerusalem they hear the assembled disciples saying “*It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon*” (we have no record of this meeting) – they give an account of their experience when suddenly Jesus is there with them.

John only records Mary Magdalene early at the empty tomb. She runs to find Peter and John not knowing who has removed the body – the disciples run to the tomb, John arriving first but staying outside, looking in. Typical, impetuous, Peter arrives later and goes straight in! They find what Mary has described - an empty tomb – and see the folded grave clothes. After the disciples leave, Mary is left alone outside the tomb, and there she has the encounter with the man she supposes to be the gardener who is of course the risen Jesus. This section of John’s gospel ends with Mary going to the disciples with the news that “she had seen the Lord”.

As I have been comparing these gospel accounts two memories have come to mind. The first, from university days, was of seeing a pamphlet on the desk in the Hall of Residence room of a Baptist friend. It was a printed sermon of Charles Spurgeon entitled “Supposing Him to be the Gardener”. Just seeing that title, I remember, set off my own thoughts – with the question “What if he had been the gardener – what would have been the consequences; what would have been the subsequent course of world history”?

The second memory comes from many years later – an Educational Cruise on the SS Uganda, visiting Israel. The Garden Tomb was our last stop of the day before returning to the ship in Haifa. The resident guide explained that there could be no certainty the tomb in the garden was the one described in the Bible – all that could be said was it had been authenticated as a tomb of the time of Jesus. One of our pupils asked in rather hushed tones ‘Is it alright to take photographs?’

The reply that was given brought a smile to my face and also to that of my wife –

‘Take as many as you like, it is only an empty tomb’ to which was added ‘**That’s the point isn’t it, it is an empty tomb.**

He is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Hallelujah!

Holy, Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty.
Holy, Holy, holy, holy
is the song around the throne.
Where the angels and the elders gather
There in sweet assembly,
Singing holy, singing holy
Is the Lord our God.

Worthy, worthy, worthy, worthy
Is the Lamb who was slain for me.
Worthy, worthy, worthy, worthy
Is the song within my heart.
I could choose to spend eternity
With this my sole refrain:
Singing worthy, singing worthy
Is the Lord our God.

*The Way, the Truth, the Life, the Light,
The King, the Great I Am.
My life, my all, my every breath,
The Rock on which I stand.*

Oh Jesus, Oh Jesus,
How You suffered and died for us.
**Oh Jesus, Oh Jesus,
But that tomb is empty now.
And I long to gaze upon Your throne
And all Your risen glory:
Singing Jesus, singing Jesus
Is the Lord of all.**