

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

Lectionary Readings: **Isaiah 60: 1-14**
 Psalm 96
 Revelation 3: 1-13
 Mark 16: 9-16

Isaiah 60 is given a heading “**The glory of Zion**” in the NIV; “**The Future Glory of Jerusalem**” in the Good News Bible and “**The Ingathering of the Dispersed**” in the New Revised Standard Version.

It begins with well known words which are an ‘encouraging command’:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. (NRSVA)

To set the scene we go back a chapter to a passage headed in the NIV as “**Sin, Confession and Redemption**”.

At the end of that chapter we read these words:

- The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice.
- ¹⁶ He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.
- ¹⁷ He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.
- ¹⁸ According to what they have done, so will he repay wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes; he will repay the islands their due.
- ¹⁹ From the west, people will fear the name of the LORD, and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory. For he will come like a pent-up flood that the breath of the LORD drives along.^[a]
- ²⁰ ‘The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,’ declares the LORD.
- ²¹ ‘As for me, this is my covenant with them,’ says the LORD. ‘My Spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants – from this time on and for ever,’ says the LORD.

Footnotes

- a. [Isaiah 59:19](#) Or *When enemies come in like a flood, / the Spirit of the LORD will put them to flight*

The Eternal Covenant Promise is there in the last verse – leading into our reading in chapter 60. In contrast, the early part of chapter 59, after a hopeful statement from the prophet, describes the condition of God’s people:

- Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.
- ² But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.
- ³ For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken falsely, and your tongue mutters wicked things.
- ⁴ No one calls for justice; no one pleads a case with integrity.

Half way through there appears to be vain searching for justice and for righteousness, followed immediately by a restatement of offences, leading into the passage from the end of the chapter, already quoted:

- ⁹ So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.
- ¹⁰ Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like people without eyes. At midday we stumble as if it were twilight; among the strong, we are like the dead.
- ¹¹ We all growl like bears; we moan mournfully like doves. We look for justice, but find none; for deliverance, but it is far away.
- ¹² For our offences are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us. Our offences are ever with us, and we acknowledge our iniquities:
- ¹³ rebellion and treachery against the LORD, turning our backs on our God, inciting revolt and oppression, uttering lies our hearts have conceived.
- ¹⁴ So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter.
- ¹⁵ Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey.

The Lord expects to find His people following the demands of the Covenant which He has made with them.

Is there a personal challenge for each one of us today, a challenge in these thoughts penned so long ago by the prophet Isaiah? How good are we at holding to and living by the Covenant made with us?

We are reminded of words from our Annual Service:

Christ has many services to be done: some are easy, others are difficult; some bring honour, others bring reproach.

Some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests, others are contrary to both.

In some we may please Christ and please ourselves.

In others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.

Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us.

Isaiah 60 reminds us that the Lord is faithful - His Covenant Promises are Eternal. Here is an OT picture of the ‘New Jerusalem’; we turn to Revelation for the equivalent in the NT. In Isaiah we see nations coming to the Holy City – we are reminded of the hymn – “At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, every tongue confess Him King of Glory now.”.

The NIV Bible Commentary gives as a heading to Psalm 96 – “**The Lord Will Judge the World in Righteousness**” and by way of introduction says “This psalm belongs to a group of psalms (93–100) that affirm the Lord’s rule over the earth and form a subcategory of the descriptive praise psalms”.

In the introductory footnote to this psalm in the NIV Study Bible we read – “A call to all nations to praise the Lord as the only God and to proclaim the glory of His reign throughout the world – an OT anticipation of the world mission of the NT people of God (see Matthew 28: 16-20)”:

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.

¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’

The Study Bible footnote goes on to say “The psalm is composed of two parts: (1) a call to all nations to sing the praise of the Lord (vv. 1-6); (2) a call to all nations to worship the Lord and to hail throughout the world the glory of His righteous rule (vv. 7-13).”

As we read the text of the psalm (which also appears in a slightly altered form in 1 Chronicles 16: 23-33) the lines of many hymns and songs are brought to mind, some of which are listed below:

George Herbert	Let all the world in every corner sing	(H&P 10)
J. P. McAuley	Creation sings a new song to the Lord	(H&P 332)
Isaac Watts	Joy to the world, the Lord is come!	(STF 330)
Charles Wesley	Rejoice, the Lord is King!	(STF 335)
John S. B. Monsell	O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness	(Songs of Fellowship 457)
Darlene Zschech	‘Shout to the Lord all the earth’	(Songs of Fellowship 935)

The word ‘ASCRIBE’ stands out in verse 7 and verse 8 – reminding us again of a popular song written by Peter West, Mary Lou Locke and Mary Kirkbride which is based primarily on Deuteronomy 32: 3-4: (NKJV - New King James Version)

³ For I proclaim the name of the LORD: **Ascribe greatness to our God.**

⁴ *He is the Rock, His work is perfect; For all His ways are justice, A God of truth and without injustice; Righteous and upright is He.*

Verse 12:

¹² Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.

reminds us of Isaiah 55: 12, and another familiar song:

¹² You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.

Both OT readings this week look forward to the fulfilment of God’s plan, as seen at that time – the restoration of Zion and the acknowledgement of the Lord by all nations. In our reading from Revelation we see the unfolding of the Lord’s plan in NT times.

Revelation chapters 2 and 3 contain the seven letters to the churches – Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. All were located in modern Turkey and relatively close to each other (see map on the next page).

Two weeks ago the reading from Revelation looked at the letters to the churches at Ephesus and Smyrna; last week the reading continued with the letter to the church in Pergamum. **Today we read the letters to the churches in Sardis and Philadelphia** and conclude next week with the letter to the church in Laodicea.

Of the seven churches it would appear that the letter to the church in Thyatira has been omitted from our readings!

As can be seen from the map Sardis was a prominent city in the region with direct trading routes to Smyrna, Ephesus, Thyatira and Philadelphia. It had been the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia but like all cities in the area came under Greek, then Roman influence (it was the seat of a Roman proconsul). The city was abandoned about 1402AD - its archaeological remains are located in the modern city of Sart (near Salhili) in the Turkish province of Manisa.

In the words of “him who holds the sevenfold Spirit”, bringing the vision to John, there is a warning to the Christians in Sardis:

I know your deeds; **you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.**

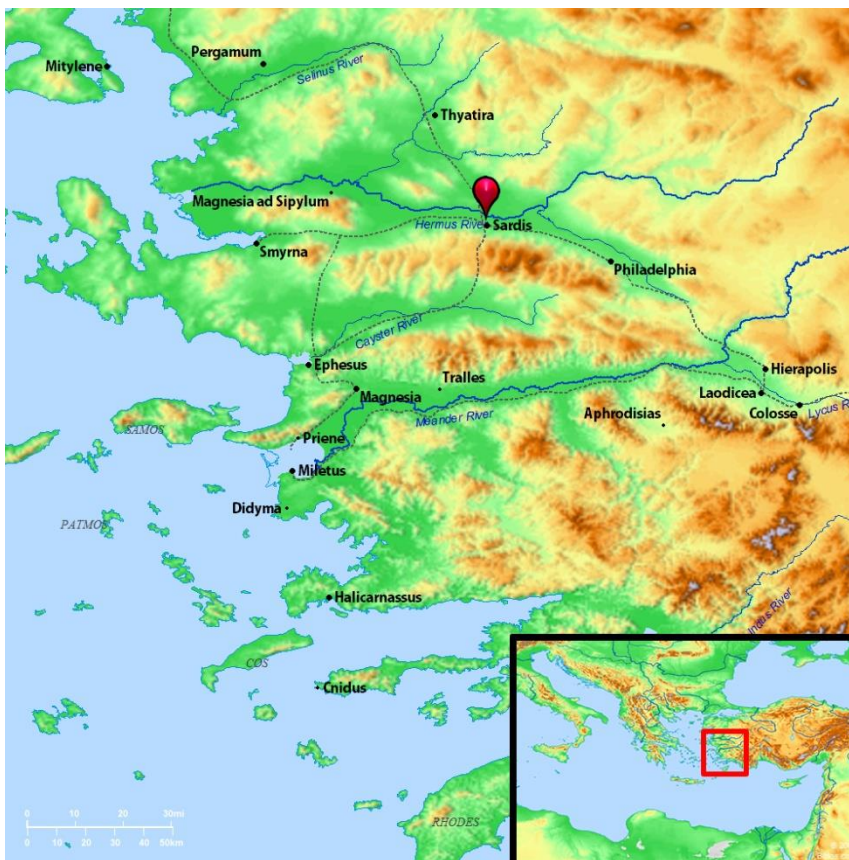
² Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.

³ Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent.

But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

Is there anything worse that can be said - **you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead!**

Perhaps we should pause at this point and ask ourselves – What is our reputation? Is it false? - have we created an illusion of life when we are ‘dead’ inside?



If there is any element of ‘yes’ in answering that question all is not lost because the Spirit goes on to say – “Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and **repent**”.

The warning then follows for those who will not ‘repent’ and ‘wake up’.

There are, however, some in Sardis who are really ‘alive’ (not ‘dead’ like their compatriots) - they will be rewarded, pictured as dressed in white which is a common description in Revelation for the redeemed.

Philadelphia (modern Alashehir) was a city of commercial importance conveniently located as the gateway to the high central plateau of the province of Asia in Asia Minor. As in the USA today, the name of the city means “brotherly love” – here it commemorates the loyalty and devotion of Attalus II to his brother Eumenes II.

In the message to the church in Philadelphia there is a verse, in the NIV translation, which appears to almost introduce a contradiction: (v. 8)

⁸ I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.

I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

They have little strength yet have remained faithful, how was that possible?

In his Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, John Wesley comments on this verse:

I have given before thee an opened door – To enter into the joy of thy Lord; and meantime, to go unhindered in every good work. **Thou hast a little strength** – But little outward human strength; a little, poor, mean, despicable company. Yet thou *hast kept my word* – Both in judgement and practice.

Note how, in the common English translation Wesley uses, an indirect article is included.

We see this introduction of the indirect article in a number of other translations e.g. 21st Century King James Version:

I know thy works. Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it. **For thou hast a little strength,** and hast kept My Word, and hast not denied My name.

Among the ‘paraphrases’, J. B. Phillips renders the verse in this way:

I know what you have done. See, I have given you a door flung wide open, which no man can close!
For you have some little power and have been faithful to my message and have not denied my name.

And The Message has:

“I see what you’ve done. Now see what I’ve done. I’ve opened a door before you that no one can slam shut.
You don’t have much strength, I know that; you used what you had to keep my Word. You didn’t deny me when times were rough.

Matthew Henry, in his Commentary, has the following to say on verse 8:

This church is commended: *Thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and has not denied my name.* In this there seems to be couched a gentle reproof: “*Thou hast a little strength,* a little grace, which, though it be not proportionate to the wide door of opportunity which I have opened to thee, yet it is true grace, and hast kept thee faithful.”

True grace, though weak, has the divine approbation; but though Christ accepts a little strength, yet believers should not rest satisfied in a little, but should strive to grow in grace, to be *strong in faith, giving glory to God.*

True grace, though weak, will do more than the greatest gifts or highest degrees of common grace, for it will enable the Christian to keep the word of Christ, and not to deny his name. Obedience, fidelity, and a free confession of the name of Christ, are the fruits of true grace, and are pleasing to Christ as such.

The letter makes it clear that this church has obviously suffered greatly at the hands of the Synagogue, and not just from the ‘genuine’ Jews in its membership.

The passage heads towards a conclusion with words of encouragement and assurance: (NIV)

¹⁰ Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.

The letters to these churches in Sardis and Philadelphia, end, as do the letters to all seven churches, with an instruction:

¹³ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

It is an instruction which still applies to each of our churches today – to be listening for the voice of, and guidance from the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel reading today takes us back to the events of Easter – the appearances of Jesus to His followers after the resurrection. It comes from the final chapter of Mark and we read, before the text of the passage in the NIV translation:

The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16: 9-20

The NRSV translation and the NIV Bible Commentary refer to this passage as the LONGER ENDING to the Gospel.

It would appear that a collection of appearances has been gleaned and summarised from some of the other gospels.

That to Mary Magdalene is recorded solely in John's Gospel. She has found the tomb empty: goes and tells Peter and John, who run to the tomb to see for themselves. It is afterwards, alone in the garden, that she encounters Jesus – we then read she went and told the disciples but there is no recorded reaction from them. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Mary is one of the women who go to the empty tomb early in the morning where they encounter (a) 'heavenly being(s)' with news of the resurrection. They are hurrying from the tomb in Matthew, on their way to the disciples, when they all encounter Jesus. The message to the disciples is to go to Galilee which we are told they do in Matthew 28: 16.

Mark tells us that after encountering the young man in the tomb the 'trembling and bewildered' women flee and say 'nothing to anyone'.

It is only Luke who tells us the disciples (except Peter) 'did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense'. Peter we are told ran to the tomb and 'went away wondering to himself what had happened'.

Verses 12 and 13 of Mark 16 clearly refer to the experience of the two followers on the Emmaus Road (recorded only in Luke).

We have gospel accounts of Jesus appearing to His disciples on the evening of that first day of the week and a week later when Thomas is with them (John 20); also, from Luke, His appearance as the Emmaus Road account is being given by the two followers returned to Jerusalem. In none of the accounts do we read 'Jesus appeared to the eleven as they were eating' – He is, however, offered and eats fish in the Luke account.

The reading concludes with Mark's (or later) version of the Great Commission:

¹⁵ He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.

¹⁶ Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

The Gospel of Mark then concludes with four verses that may appear extreme!

¹⁷ And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues;

¹⁸ they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on people who are ill, and they will get well.'

¹⁹ After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God.

²⁰ Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.

Breathe on me, Breath of God;
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what Thou dost love,
And do what Thou wouldst do.

Breathe on me, Breath of God,
Until my heart is pure,
Until with Thee I will one will,
To do and to endure.

Breathe on me, Breath of God,
Till I am wholly Thine,
Until this earthly part of me
Glow with Thy fire divine.

Breathe on me, Breath of God;
So shall I never die,
But live with Thee the perfect life
Of Thine eternity.