

## Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (2<sup>nd</sup> Service)

**Lectionary Readings:**                **Jeremiah 3:21 – 4:2**  
    **Psalm 33: 1-12, (13-22)**  
    **Titus 2: 1-8, 11-14**  
    **Matthew 4: 12-23**

To put the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah in context it is worth reading from the beginning of chapter 3:

- <sup>1</sup>If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and marries another man, should he return to her again?  
Would not the land be completely defiled?  
But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers – would you now return to me?’ declares the LORD.
- <sup>2</sup>Look up to the barren heights and see. Is there any place where you have not been ravished?  
By the roadside you sat waiting for lovers, sat like a nomad in the desert.  
You have defiled the land with your prostitution and wickedness.
- <sup>3</sup>Therefore the showers have been withheld, and no spring rains have fallen.  
Yet you have the brazen look of a prostitute; you refuse to blush with shame.
- <sup>4</sup>Have you not just called to me: “My Father, my friend from my youth, <sup>5</sup> will you always be angry?  
Will your wrath continue for ever?”  
This is how you talk, but you do all the evil you can.’

### Unfaithful Israel

- <sup>6</sup>During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, ‘Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. <sup>7</sup> I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. <sup>8</sup> I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery. <sup>9</sup> Because Israel’s immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. <sup>10</sup> In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretence,’ declares the LORD.
- <sup>11</sup> The LORD said to me, ‘Faithless Israel is more righteous than unfaithful Judah. <sup>12</sup> Go, proclaim this message towards the north:  
“Return, faithless Israel,” declares the LORD, “I will frown on you no longer, for I am faithful,” declares the LORD, “I will not be angry for ever.  
<sup>13</sup> Only acknowledge your guilt – you have rebelled against the LORD your God, you have scattered your favours to foreign gods under every spreading tree, and have not obeyed me,” declares the LORD.
- <sup>14</sup> ‘Return, faithless people,’ declares the LORD, ‘for I am your husband. I will choose you – one from a town and two from a clan – and bring you to Zion. <sup>15</sup> Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding. <sup>16</sup> In those days, when your numbers have increased greatly in the land,’ declares the LORD, ‘people will no longer say, “The ark of the covenant of the LORD.” It will never enter their minds or be remembered; it will not be missed, nor will another one be made. <sup>17</sup> At that time they will call Jerusalem The Throne of the LORD, and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honour the name of the LORD. No longer will they follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts. <sup>18</sup> In those days the people of Judah will join the people of Israel, and together they will come from a northern land to the land I gave your ancestors as an inheritance.
- <sup>19</sup> I myself said,  
“How gladly would I treat you like my children and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.”  
I thought you would call me “Father” and not turn away from following me.  
<sup>20</sup> But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to me,’ declares the LORD.

In the light of this passage and the reading for today we look at the background of Jeremiah. He was born into a priestly family at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin – in the kingdom of Judah. There is no written evidence that he ever served in the capacity of a priest but the ‘Word of the Lord’ came to him, making him a prophet, in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah as king of Judah. Josiah, we read, was a righteous king (unlike his father, his son and his grandson - 2 Kings 21-23). These chapters record all that Josiah did; the discovery of the ‘Book of the Law’ in the Temple during his reign; the renewal of the Covenant and the removal of places and people associated with the worship of Baal.

2 Kings 23: 25-27:

- <sup>25</sup> Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did – with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses.
- <sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the LORD did not turn away from the heat of his fierce anger, which burned against Judah because of all that Manasseh (*Josiah’s grandfather*) had done to arouse his anger.
- <sup>27</sup> So the LORD said, ‘I will remove Judah also from my presence as I removed Israel, and I will reject Jerusalem, the city I chose, and this temple, about which I said, “My Name shall be there.”

As we read Jeremiah 3 we see that Jeremiah, prophesying during the reign of a righteous king, is nevertheless speaking to nations (both Judah and Israel) where the ordinary citizens have turned from Jehovah; turned from the Lord.

The content of our reading is interesting – the people have turned from the Lord but clearly they realise they have lost something of importance. They cry out, weep and plead and the Lord says:

“Return faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding”

There is an immediate response:

Yes, we will come to you, for you are the Lord our God.

This theme continues throughout the reading – God’s promise to His people, if they remain in Him.

Some time ago, I purchased on eBay two computer discs entitled “The Methodism & John Wesley Collection”. They contain a mass of scanned documents – largely held in libraries in the USA and in Canada – containing much material going back to 19<sup>th</sup> Century publications in the UK.

(If you are interested, look on eBay – as of 20<sup>th</sup> Jan, 2 Copies are still available from ‘rare-book-collections’ - £4-65 total – The title to look for is “322 RARE CHRISTIAN METHODIST BOOKS ON DVD- JOHN WESLEY SERMONS HYMNS BIBLE FAITH”.)

Glancing through one document entitled ‘The Separation of the Methodists from the church of England’ (a Ph.D. thesis, of Columbia University, submitted by R.L.Tucker and then published (1918) for the author by ‘The Methodist Book Concern – New York City’) I read these words of John Wesley from a survey of the life round about him:

*“What is the present characteristic of the English nation?”*

He answers his own question.

*“It is ungodliness. This is at present the characteristic of the English nation. Ungodliness is our universal, our constant, our peculiar characteristic.”*

The people of Judah had turned from the Lord, but appeared to know it – to be calling out to Him; the English at the time of Wesley were decadent. There had been austerity under the puritans but after the restoration of the monarchy (Charles 2) in 1660 it would appear that ‘anything goes’ was the watchword of the day, continuing to the time of the Wesley brothers.

What of today – is there any similarity?

It would probably be true to say that both of the earlier civilisations had a ‘belief’ in the existence of God, whether they followed His ways or not. Is that true for today or do the majority think that God is just an anachronism or do they think He is plain irrelevant?

If this is the case we can see that the message of Jeremiah while still relevant needs a different way of being stated.

Let us pray that as individuals and as the church we may be guided in the way we present the truth of the Christian Gospel to the world in which we live today.

Psalm 33, like a number of the Psalms used recently in the Lectionary, commences with an invitation or even an injunction to ‘Praise the Lord’.

<sup>1</sup> Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him.

<sup>2</sup> Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.

<sup>3</sup> Sing to him a new song; play skilfully, and shout for joy.

The Psalmist then tells us of things the Lord has done and why the people of earth should listen to Him. Verses 10-11 speak of the ‘Lord’s Plans’; verse 12 of blessing that comes on those that follow Him.

<sup>10</sup> The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples.

<sup>11</sup> But the plans of the LORD stand firm for ever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.

<sup>12</sup> **Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people he chose for his inheritance.**

At the start of the optional section of our reading (verses 13-22), there is a picture of the Lord looking down on mankind as it struggles to find its own way and rely on its own strength. Reminiscences are here of the situation found in Judah at the time of Jeremiah; in England at the time of Wesley and today – humans relying on their own strength.

The Psalm ends with reassuring words for those who do put their trust in the Lord.

<sup>18</sup> **But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love,**

<sup>19</sup> **to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.**

<sup>20</sup> **We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.**

<sup>21</sup> **In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name.**

<sup>22</sup> **May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.**

There are fourteen New Testament references to Titus. He clearly travelled with and was a co-worker of Paul – often moving between the Christian communities on his own. He is not mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles and the first reference we find to him is in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians when the apostle is waiting anxiously for Titus to bring news of the Christians in Corinth. Ten of the fourteen references are in this one letter – Titus being sent back to Corinth, (a) carrying this very letter and (b) going back to complete a collection he had initiated but not completed before travelling to Macedonia to meet up with Paul.

In the letter to the Galatians we learn that Paul and Barnabas took Titus with them to Jerusalem. We also learn that Titus was a Greek believer – uncircumcised, that being a practice/requirement that caused some tension in the early church between Jewish and Gentile Christians. We are told in Galatians that there was no insistence that Titus should comply with Jewish law!

After his usual greeting at the beginning of chapter one, Paul explains in his letter to Titus why he is writing to him:

**Appointing elders who love what is good**

<sup>5</sup>The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.

<sup>6</sup>An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.

<sup>7</sup>Since an overseer manages God's household, he must be blameless – not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. <sup>8</sup>Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.

<sup>9</sup>He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

Having dealt with the matter of appointing elders Paul turns, in chapter two, to the wider and more general theme headed **“Doing good for the sake of the gospel”**.

What follows is a description of the way in which Christians are expected to live and behave – ‘rules’ - for older men, for older women, for young men and for young women.

Titus is teaching the Cretan Christians and Paul cautions him (as he might well caution us if we were recipients of his letter):

<sup>7</sup>In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness <sup>8</sup>and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.

We can be certain that many will be watching us, looking for any apparent fault; ready to point the accusing finger – even if they themselves have no belief in the Lord or the Christian message.

Our reading leaves out verses 9 and 10 – it refers to slavery and the way it was viewed at the time the letter was written:

<sup>9</sup>Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, <sup>10</sup>and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive.

The chapter moves towards a conclusion by expressing the hope of every Christian:

<sup>11</sup>For the **grace of God has appeared** that offers salvation to all people.

<sup>12</sup>**It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions**, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, <sup>13</sup>while we wait for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, <sup>14</sup>who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Paul concludes the chapter with instructions to Titus in a final verse:

<sup>15</sup>These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you.

We see, in verse 12, a link back to John Wesley's description of the English characteristic in his time (ungodly) and to the prophecies of Jeremiah to wayward nations.

Matthew, in his Gospel, writes of Jesus calling his first disciples – Simon, Andrew, James and John. We have a near identical account in Mark. Jesus is baptised in the Jordan then tempted in the desert by the devil.

News comes to Jesus that John the Baptist has been put in prison and this appears to trigger the ‘preaching’ ministry of Jesus – in Galilee, his home territory. Matthew includes verses 15-16 of chapter 4, the prophecy of Isaiah, as he is writing for predominantly Jewish readers.

Matthew records that Jesus left Nazareth, going to live in Capernaum – a town that had a relatively short existence, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Mark does not record Jesus moving from Nazareth to Capernaum but in both Gospels the call of the first disciples came when ‘Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee.

I have often wondered about this ‘call’. Did it just happen, out of the blue? If so what induced four fishermen to instantly leave their boats and equipment; their livelihood; their families? We know, from later reference to his mother in law, that Simon Peter was married. We don't know about Andrew, James or John but according to the Gospel accounts in Matthew and in Mark the latter two left their father in the boat when they went to follow Jesus!

Had the four of them heard Jesus preach and so come under his influence? If He lived in Capernaum did they actually know Him before being called, or at least had there been some previous encounter with Jesus?

We will never know the answer to those musings - all we know is that the four fishermen followed Jesus as disciples; lived and travelled with Him for several years; experienced His death, resurrection and ascension; received the gift of the Holy Spirit; became leaders of the early Christian church and in many cases were also executed for their faith.

Luke has a different timing of events. Jesus returns to Nazareth after His baptism and the temptations and goes into the synagogue on the Sabbath. On claiming fulfilment of a prophecy from Isaiah he is rejected and driven from the town – moving to Capernaum where He begins to teach and to heal. In chapter 4: 38ff we find the account of the healing of Simon's mother in law.

The disciples are called in the **following chapter** – Jesus is ‘crowded’ on the beach, gets into a boat (Simon’s) and teaches the crowd from this ‘floating pulpit’. Afterwards He tells Simon to put out into deep water and let down the net. We all know the reply – “we’ve been fishing all night and have caught nothing, but because You say so I will let down the nets”.

The catch is great, too much for one boat to handle and they have to call for assistance (from James and John in their boat). Even with the catch distributed between two boats – each is nearly sinking.

Simon turns to Jesus and asks Him to leave because Simon sees himself as a sinner. As in Matthew and Mark, Jesus invites them to become ‘fishers of men’ – they pull their boats up on the beach, leave them and follow Jesus.

When we read these accounts from the Gospels I wonder if we ever reflect on the sacrifices made by the four fishermen and in their turn by the later disciples.

Does it make us ask what call has been placed on our lives and how we have responded to it?

Behold the servant of the Lord!  
I wait thy guiding eye to feel,  
To hear and keep thy every word,  
To prove and do thy perfect will,  
Joyful from my own works to cease,  
Glad to fulfil all righteousness.

Me if thy grace vouchsafe to use,  
Meanest of all thy creatures, me,  
The deed, the time, the manner choose;  
Let all my fruit be found of thee;  
Let all my works in thee be wrought,  
By thee to full perfection brought.

My every weak though good design  
O’errule or change, as seems thee meet;  
Jesus, let all my work be thine!  
Thy work, O Lord, is all complete,  
And pleasing in thy Father’s sight;  
Thou only hast done all things right.

Here then to thee thine own I leave;  
Mould as thou wilt thy passive clay;  
But let me all thy stamp receive,  
But let me all thy words obey,  
Serve with a single heart and eye,  
And to thy glory live and die.

Charles Wesley

**Eric Brown**