

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year A – Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (2nd Service)

Lectionary Readings: 2 Kings 6: 8-23
Psalm 95
Acts 17: 15-34
John 6: 56-69

The Kingdom of Israel was under constant threat from the surrounding tribes. In the reading today it is the king of Aram who is at war with Israel. He clearly plans his attacks only to find them thwarted time and time again; so often that he suspects a 'leak' of information. It is pointed out that Elisha keeps providing the king of Israel with the information necessary to deter each attack.

Having been told where Elisha can be found the king of Aram sends an army to capture the prophet. They surround the city of Dothan – Elisha's servant is terrified and asks "What shall we do?" After Elisha prays, his servant sees the 'heavenly host' – horses and chariots of fire, filling the hills and surrounding the prophet.

When the enemy come to 'take' Elisha we read of a wonderful deception – the prophet has again prayed; for blindness to come on the surrounding army.

'You are not in the right place'; 'I will lead you on your quest' – so the army of Aram are led to Samaria, to the Israeli capital. Blindness removed they see the danger they are in – the king of Israel asks Elisha if he should kill them. (The Old Testament is full of bloodshed).

Elisha has other plans – treat them honourably, as you would prisoners of war. Feed them, then send them home – the result? "So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory."

We are reminded of Romans 12:

⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.

¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written:

'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. [Deuteronomy 32: 35]

²⁰ On the contrary:

'If your enemy is hungry, feed him;

if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' [Proverbs 25: 21-22]

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

There are two distinct parts of the Psalm this week. Verses 1-7 declare the greatness of God and are an invitation to praise and worship. Verses 8-11 warn of the human tendency to neglect the Lord.

"Today, if only you would hear his voice,"

It seems as though the Psalmist is making an impassioned plea – "if only". There is then reference to God's chosen people 'hardening' their hearts against the Lord at 'Meribah' and at 'Massah'. We go back to Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, to a time not long after they had crossed the Red Sea and travelled into the Desert of Shur. They come to Marah and finding only bitter water they grumble against Moses. He cries out to the Lord and is shown a piece of wood which he throws into the water, making it pleasant and drinkable.

It is here at Marah that the Lord makes a 'covenant' with His people. Exodus 15:

"There the LORD issued a ruling and instruction for them and put them to the test. ²⁶ He said, 'If you listen carefully to the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you.'

²⁷ Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water."

We find the Israelites 'moaning' again in chapter 16, this time for lack of food – Manna and Quail are provided. They still haven't learnt that the Lord is faithful and will provide as shortly after they are again quarrelling with Moses over lack of water: "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" Moses cries out to the Lord, probably exasperated but also fearful: "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me."

⁵ The LORD answered Moses, 'Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.' So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ And he called the place **Massah** and **Meribah** because the Israelites quarrelled and because they tested the LORD saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'

Footnotes in the NIV tell us **Massah** means "testing" and **Meribah** means "quarrelling". The Psalmist reminds readers that the people who had been led out of Egypt and who tested and quarrelled with Moses - and through him with the Lord, were condemned to wander in the wilderness for forty years before Joshua led them into the Promised Land.

Remember the words of Joshua, much later, in his “Farewell to the Israelite Leaders”:

4 ‘Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshipped beyond the River Euphrates and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. 15 But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.’

Paul has come to Athens – a city renowned for its intellectual excellence. Preaching, as he traditionally does in the synagogue but also in the market-place we soon find Paul in debate with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, the two main groups of ‘thinkers’ in Athens at the time.

The Greeks loved to debate and argue, they had many original ‘scientific’ ideas but lacked or ignored the modern practice of practical testing of those ideas. Listening to Paul, the philosophers took him, to continue the discussion at the ‘Court of Areopagus’ – their main place for discussion and debate.

The first time I visited Athens (I have been three times, never intentionally, but that is another story!) I was surprised to see that this ‘Court of Areopagus’ was nothing more than an open, rocky hillside (Ares Hill) just below the Acropolis.

Paul has come before the elite thinkers and leaders of Athens and he, a highly educated man himself, appears to take them on at their ‘own game’. He even quoted two of their number!

“For in him we live and move and have our being”, the Cretan philosopher Epimenides, and

“We are his offspring”, the Cilician Stoic philosopher, Aratus.



The reaction of those listening is predictable; some sneer; others say they would like to continue the debate on another day; but there are listeners who become followers - Acts gives us a couple of names but unfortunately does not record their number.

Contrast this with Paul arriving in Corinth, another Greek city - he describes it early in his first letter to the Corinthian Christians: (Chapter 2 NKJV)

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. 3 I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Do we, in the twenty-first Century, try to present the Christian Gospel with arguments that reflect current secular thinking, (like Paul in Athens), or do we rely on the Holy Spirit to give us the ‘right words to say, at the right time’, (Paul in Corinth).

We remember also the words of Jesus to his disciples as recorded in Mark 13:

9 ‘You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. 10 And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. 11 Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.

12 ‘Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. 13 Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

The Gospel reading this week continues the theme of **Jesus as the Bread of Life**. The first three verses of the reading repeat and reinforce the final three verses of last week’s reading from John 6.

There is little more to add to comments over the last two weeks.

Once again we have Jesus saying “..... No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them”.

Linking the Gospel with Paul writing to the Corinthians we can emphasise verse 63:

**“The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing.
The words I have spoken to you – they are full of the Spirit (or are Spirit) and life.”**

Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me;
Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me.
Fill me anew,
Fill me anew.
Spirit of the Lord
Fall afresh on me.

Paul Armstrong