

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

Lectionary Readings: Ezekiel 12: 21 – 13: 16

Psalm 108

Acts 19: 1-20

Mark 7: 24-37

During this last week Blandford MC has commenced, by ‘zoom’, a study based on Tom Stuckey’s book “Methodism Unfinished” (A six week course based on the reflections of ten Methodists).

The subject for week 1 was ‘Babylon – Understanding contemporary culture.

In his introduction, Tom refers to a previous publication of his:

“Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land” (The future of the Church in Britain – a Methodist Perspective).

This in turn is a reference to Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

²There on the poplars we hung our harps,

³for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’

⁴**How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?**

Like all human beings, God’s people fall under the influence of their surroundings. The first of our discussion questions this week was ‘Dramatic changes have taken place in Western Society which have affected all the churches.

What are these changes? What benefits have they brought? What about the negatives?’

The Israelites, led out of Egypt by Moses and into the ‘Promised Land’ by Joshua are influenced by surrounding tribes and demand a king. Eventually the Lord accedes to their wish, Saul is anointed and commences his reign as a man ‘in tune’ with God. It doesn’t last and he is replaced by David – who remains faithful to the Lord despite one or two ‘dodgy’ episodes in his life. His son Solomon also ‘fears the Lord’, but we read that in later life he is led astray by his many foreign wives in terms of which god he worships.

The history of Israel records many, many kings who did not follow the ways of the Lord and a few who did and tried hard to re-establish the worship of Yahweh. Their influence, however, was often superficial as the people had become set in their ‘corrupt’ ways. Turning from God had its consequences – the Kingdom divided into the 10 tribes of the Northern Kingdom and the 2 tribes, Judah and Benjamin. The first kingdom to fall is that of the 10 tribes, conquered by the Assyrians. It almost disappears from the pages of history at this point.

100 years later the Southern Kingdom is also conquered – this time by the Babylonians. Leaders and other prominent people are taken into exile in Babylon, among them a priest by the name of Ezekiel. In exile he became a prophet (Ezekiel 1: 1-3):

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.

²On the fifth of the month – it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin – ³the 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.

It is clear from our reading today that among the exiled Israelites were many ‘false prophets’. The NIV Study Bible comments on chapter 13 verse 6 – ‘their visions are false’:

“Whether the false prophets had actual visions is unknown, but they claimed to have received revelations from God when in reality their messages only proclaimed what their hearers wanted to hear.

There are references to similar situations - Isaiah 30:10; Jeremiah 23: 9-17 and 2 Timothy 4: 3.

Paul writes to Timothy - 2 Timothy 4: 1-4:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ²preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. ³For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather round them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

At the time of Ezekiel, the false prophets clearly had great but ineffectual influence. Their prophecies were not fulfilled and we read of the common proverb – ‘the days go by and every vision comes to nothing’.

Ezekiel brings the authentic ‘Word of the Lord’ but the Israelites see it only as a vision for many years in the future.

The Lord counters –

‘Therefore say to them, “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: none of my words will be delayed any longer; whatever I say will be fulfilled, declares the Sovereign LORD.”’

The remainder of the Lectionary reading for today has Ezekiel condemning the false prophets. They had declared ‘Peace and Prosperity’ which in its turn encouraged house-building; hence the references to whitewash on walls as these ‘new’ houses were decorated. The walls, the houses, would not withstand the coming onslaught as the declaration of ‘Peace and Prosperity’ was false.

Returning to the study theme – are we seduced by the ways of the world? Are there, in the Church today, false prophets?

Let us pray that we may hear clearly the words of a latter day Ezekiel; bringing the ‘Word of the Lord’.

The Psalm today – “A song. A psalm of David” follows a typical pattern:

Praise (verses 1-5)

An appeal to the Lord – made with confidence (verse 6)

God speaking – declaring His authority (verses 7-9)

A second appeal to the Lord (verses 10-12)

A declaration of confidence in the Lord (verse 13)

‘With God we shall gain the victory, and he will trample down our enemies.’

In the concluding verses of Acts 18 we read how Paul travelled from Corinth to Ephesus with Priscilla and Aquila (mentioned last week) and then continued his journey to Antioch. After his departure a Jew named Apollos arrived in Ephesus and began to speak about Jesus in the synagogue – he taught accurately from the scriptures but had only experienced the baptism of John. It is clear Priscilla and Aquila took him in hand – the description in Acts 18 is really inadequate!

He (*Apollos*) began to speak boldly in the synagogue.

When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God **more adequately**.

Priscilla and Aquila clearly brought the work of the Holy Spirit into the life of Apollos for we read he went to Achaia with the encouragement and written support of the brothers in Ephesus. In 1 Corinthians 16 Paul writes of “*our brother Apollos*”.

Today’s reading from Acts 19 commences with Apollos in Corinth and Paul returning to Ephesus where he finds a group of disciples, clearly followers of Jesus, but who like Apollos, when first encountered, knew only John’s baptism for repentance.

Had they become disciples through the earlier teaching of Apollos?

If so, why hadn’t Priscilla and Aquila taken them aside as they did Apollos?

We will never know the answer to these questions but we read that after being taught about the Holy Spirit and baptised in the name of Jesus; Paul laid his hands upon them and they experienced the Holy Spirit in a “mini Pentecost”.

Once again we read how Paul argued regularly in the synagogue and encountered the usual resistance – after three months, Paul and the disciples in Ephesus took their message to a secular hall and continued daily teaching for 2 years.

His message was widely known and we read God did extraordinary miracles through Paul – items of his clothing being used to bring healing, reminiscent of the people who desired just to touch the clothing of Jesus with the confidence that they would be healed.

The final part of the reading reminds us in some ways of the passage from Ezekiel – again we are dealing with false prophets.

This group acknowledge the power possessed by Paul but have not themselves received the Holy Spirit.

The seven sons of Sceva invoke the “*name of Jesus whom Paul preaches*”.

I would have loved to be there at the moment to see the outcome!

“*Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?*”

The man with the ‘evil-spirit’ (today we would say mentally ill – but in so doing are we engaging ‘Babylon’ – adopting the thinking of the modern day world?) turns on those seven sons and we read they flee from the house naked and bleeding. We can appreciate the fearful reaction of the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus.

The Holy Spirit leads many to bring their ‘sorcery scrolls’ worth collectively 50,000 drachmas – the NIV footnote suggests a drachma was a silver coin worth about a day’s wages – that is a considerable sum!

In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

Let us pray that our work and witness may, through the working of the Holy Spirit, spread the Word of the Lord and demonstrate His power.

As background to the opening of today’s reading from the Gospel, we look back in Mark’s record:

Jesus has come to the disciples, “Walking on the Water”; they have crossed the Lake and arrived in Gennesaret where the people bring their sick friends and relatives to Jesus for healing. We read again of people begging him to let them touch the edge of His cloak – it was sufficient to bring healing.

Gennesaret was a very fertile plain on the west side of Lake Tiberias or a town in that region. Pharisees and Teachers of the Law travelled there from Jerusalem and confronted Jesus leading to the teaching in last week’s Gospel about that which defiles a person – not what goes into them, but what comes out from within.

Today we read that Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre, which is on the Mediterranean coast, a place where He tried to keep His presence secret.

Given our knowledge that “All may be saved” through Jesus, the account in the first part of our reading seems rather strange. (We do note, however, that wherever Paul preached, the message was taken initially to the synagogue, then – often only after rejection – to the Gentiles.)

When the Greek woman, born in Syrian Phoenicia, asks for healing for her daughter the reply does not sound characteristic of Jesus but her reply is profound. Perhaps Jesus was just testing the level of her faith.

²⁷First let the children eat all they want,’ he told her, ‘for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.’

²⁸‘Lord,’ she replied, ‘even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’

²⁹Then he told her, **‘For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.’**

³⁰She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Compare this with the Centurion who came to Jesus asking for a servant to be healed – I am a man under authority; just give the word. Jesus is taken by the depth of his faith – more, He declares, than He has found in all Israel.

Jesus then returns to the Sea of Galilee, this time to the eastern shore – the region of the ten cities. Here we see the faith of a group of people at work, bringing a deaf-mute to Jesus and begging Him to cure the man. The healing is typical of many recorded in the Gospels – so is the reaction of the “friends”. Instructed to tell no-one; they can’t!!

Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it.

³⁷People were overwhelmed with amazement. ‘He has done everything well,’ they said. ‘He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.’

A glorious company we sing,
The Master and His men;
He sent them forth to tell His love
By voice and hand and pen:
Then with His Spirit’s mighty flame
He made their hearts to glow,
And bade them on a troubled world
His grace and power bestow.

A company of love we sing,
Whom Jesus called to save
All sick and blind and hungry folk,
The outcast and the slave;
And now when life of man or child
Is hurt by sin and pain,
He calls for eager, willing hands
To share His love again.

A faithful company we sing,
The steadfast martyr band;
Against the rage of ruler proud
They boldly made their stand;
And still when men defy Christ’s name,
The cross is raised on high,
And for His sake His hosts go forth
To battle and to die.

O we would join this company
Of Jesus and His friends;
This church which now in every land
The reign of Christ extends;
And may that Spirit which of old
His servants did inspire
With love and joy and faith and power
Set all our hearts afire.

Albert F. Bayly

Eric Brown