

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

Lectionary Readings: **Exodus 16: 4-15**
 Psalm 81: 8-16
 Revelation 2: 12-17
 John 6: 30-40

There is a single word which links three of the four readings this week – that word is MANNA.

The Lord provides for His faithful people.

Over the past year we have encountered a number of occasions when the Israelite people, in their great Exodus from Egypt, complained against Moses and Aaron; also indirectly, and at times directly, complaining against the Lord.

Exodus 14 records the crossing of the Red Sea and deliverance from the pursuing Egyptian army; the next chapter the celebratory ‘Song of Moses and Miriam’. Miriam the prophetess is described in this chapter as Aaron’s sister, an interesting description as we know (from Moses encounter with God at the burning bush) that Aaron was the brother of Moses!

Numbers 26:57-59 provides more information:

⁵⁷ These were the Levites who were counted by their clans:
through Gershon, the Gershonite clan; through Kohath, the Kohathite clan; through Merari, the Merarite clan.

⁵⁸ These also were Levite clans:

the Libnite clan, the Hebronite clan, the Mahlite clan, the Mushite clan, the Korahite clan.

(Kohath was the forefather of Amram; ⁵⁹ the name of Amram’s wife was Jochebed, a descendant of Levi, who was born to the Levites^a in Egypt. **To Amram she bore Aaron, Moses and their sister Miriam.**

Footnotes

a. Numbers 26:59 Or *Jochebed, a daughter of Levi, who was born to Levi*

It is believed that Miriam was about 5 years old (Aaron 3 years) when Moses was born. We remember how Miriam kept watch over her baby brother when he was hidden in the rushes on the bank of the Nile.

Returning to Exodus 15: (v.22 – 16: 4)

The waters of Marah and Elim

15²² Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they travelled in the desert without finding water.

²³ When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.) ²⁴ So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What are we to drink?’

²⁵ Then Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became fit to drink.

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.

Manna and quail

16¹ The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt.

² In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.

³ The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.’

It was less than two months after their dramatic departure from Egypt and this was the second time the Israelite people had complained about conditions in the desert - the first time it concerned water, now it was the lack of food!

They ignored the ‘ruling and instruction’ of the Lord, given at the time of their first complaint at Marah, despite the promise that the Lord made to them (highlighted above in bold italic type.)

The Israelites, in the desert of Sin, ‘**all** grumble against Moses and Aaron’; but as was stated in our opening words – “The Lord provides for His **faithful** people: (Exodus 16)

⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day.

In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.

⁵ On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days.’

Moses and Aaron convey the Lord’s message to the people: (Exodus 16)

⁹ Then Moses told Aaron, ‘Say to the entire Israelite community, “Come before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.”’

¹⁰ While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked towards the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud.

¹¹ The LORD said to Moses, ¹² 'I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, "At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God."

¹³ That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp.

¹⁴ When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor.

¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, '**What is it? For they did not know what it was.**

Moses said to them, 'It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat.

The Lord provided their daily provision of meat and bread but later in chapter 16 we read that some Israelites were still not prepared to follow His instructions:

¹⁹ Then Moses said to them, 'No one is to keep any of it until morning.'

²⁰ However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them.

²⁷ Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none.

²⁸ Then the LORD said to Moses, 'How long will you^[a] refuse to keep my commands and my instructions?

²⁹ Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where they are on the seventh day; no one is to go out.'

³⁰ So the people rested on the seventh day.

³¹ The people of Israel called the bread manna.^[b] It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey.

Footnotes

a. [Exodus 16:28](#) The Hebrew is plural.

b. [Exodus 16:31](#) **Manna sounds like the Hebrew for What is it? (see verse 15).**

This was an important moment in the Exodus and in the Lord's provision for His people – as shown in the final verses of Exodus 16:

³² Moses said, 'This is what the LORD has commanded: "Take an omer of manna and keep it for the generations to come, so they can see the bread I gave you to eat in the wilderness when I brought you out of Egypt."

³³ So Moses said to Aaron, 'Take a jar and put an omer of manna in it. Then place it before the LORD to be kept for the generations to come.'

³⁴ As the LORD commanded Moses, Aaron put the manna with the tablets of the covenant law, that it might be preserved.

³⁵ The Israelites ate manna for forty years, until they came to a land that was settled; they ate manna until they reached the border of Canaan.

Clearly the omer of manna placed with the tablets of the covenant law did not suffer from maggots and decay! – it was there as a memorial to the people of the Lord's provision.

Psalm 81 is the one reading that does not contain the word manna, its theme however does coincide with those expressed in the other readings.

The psalm commences (verses 1-7) with a call to praise and worship followed by verses showing once again the Lord providing for His people:

¹ Sing for joy to God our strength; shout aloud to the God of Jacob!

² Begin the music, strike the tambourine, play the melodious harp and lyre.

³ Sound the ram's horn at the New Moon, and when the moon is full, on the day of our Feast;

⁴ this is a decree for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob.

⁵ When God went out against Egypt, he established it as a statute for Joseph.

I heard an unknown voice say:

⁶ 'I removed the burden from their shoulders; their hands were set free from the basket.

⁷ In your distress you called and I rescued you, I answered you out of a thundercloud;

I tested you at the waters of Meribah

The testing at the waters of Meribah – yet another, and later, time when the people quarrelled again with Moses over a lack of water. On this occasion the instruction to Moses is to take his staff and strike the rock to release water.

Exodus 17 records that after the water flowed and the people were satisfied Moses named the place Massah (testing) and Meribah (rebellion).

The NIV Study Bible introduces the psalm with these words:

A festival song. But it is unclear whether the festival is Passover/Unleavened Bread (v.5), the Jewish New Year (v.3) or the Feast of Tabernacles (v.3). It may have been used at all three. But more probably it was composed for use at both New Year (the first day of the month, "New Moon") and the beginning of Tabernacles (the 15th day of the month, full moon). Whether the psalm is pre-exilic or post-exilic cannot be determined, but it clearly shows the grand significance of Israel's annual religious festivals.

As memorials of God's saving acts they called Israel to celebration, remembrance and recommitment.

The second part of the psalm – our reading for today – brings a familiar cry from the Lord – “*If only my people would listen and submit to me!*”:

⁸ Hear me, my people, and I will warn you – if you would only listen to me, Israel!

⁹ You shall have no foreign god among you; you shall not worship any god other than me.

¹⁰ I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt.
Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.

¹¹ But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me.

¹² So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.

¹³ If my people would only listen to me, if Israel would only follow my ways,

¹⁴ how quickly I would subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes!

¹⁵ Those who hate the LORD would cringe before him, and their punishment would last for ever.

¹⁶ **But you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.**

Verses 11 and 12 are reflected in the traditional opening words of “The General Confession”: (Book of Common Prayer)

Almighty and most merciful Father; we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep; **we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts**; we have offended against thy holy laws; we have left undone those things which we ought to have done; we have done those things which we ought not to have done and there is no health in us.

We note once again, in the final verse of the psalm, the promise of the Lord to His people. In the desert, under the leadership of Moses, they were fed with quail and manna – here the finest of wheat and honey are promised.

Pergamum or Pergamom, the ‘church’ receiving a letter this week, was another city in modern day Turkey. It was situated a few kilometres from the Aegean coast and occupied a riverside site on the Caicus Plain. At its centre was a prominent hill which became the acropolis with many important buildings etc. including the ‘world famous’ Altar of Pergamum/Altar of Zeus (Is this Satan’s throne? – Revelation 2:13). Like the previous cities it was a place of Greek and later Roman culture –when Antiochus of Syria was marauding along the eastern borders of the Roman Empire, the Kingdom of Pergamum became Rome’s ally. The city was eventually bequeathed to Rome by Attalus III in 133BC. The major event of the early royal history of Pergamum was the struggle against the Gallic tribes, who left their name in Galatia - we remember that one of the letters Paul wrote was to the Galatians.

The opening words to the angel (messenger) of the church in Pergamum are encouraging.

“*I know where you live – where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name.*” In the city was the Altar of Zeus; also called ‘Pergamonaltar’ - a monumental structure built-in memory of the victory of the Pergamun Kingdom against the Galatians. Today the altar is found in the Pergamum Museum, Berlin – the ‘new’ museum opening in 1930 – where it had considerable influence on Nazi thinking, architecture etc.

It must have been a very difficult place in which to hold and practise any Christian faith - Roman persecution was extreme. Verse 13 of our reading refers to Antipas, my faithful witness. According to tradition; in AD 92 Antipas of Pergamum, who had been made bishop of Pergamum by the apostle John during the reign of Emperor Nero, was roasted to death in a brazen or copper bull during the persecutions of Emperor Domitian.

As in one of the two ‘letters to the churches’ seen earlier, the angel (messenger) is warned of things held against the followers in Pergamum. It is clear that ‘mixed practices’ were entertained – the duality of proclaiming a Christian faith while maintaining some elements of worship in the Roman temples.

The second accusation was that some held to “*the teaching of the Nicolaitans*” – the church in Ephesus had already been commended for “*hating the practices*” of this group. Who were they and what were their heretical doctrines?

There is uncertainty in both areas:

Several of the early Church Fathers mentioned this group, including Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Epiphanius, and Theodoret, stating that **Nicolas the Deacon**, one of the Seven, (Acts 6) was the author of the heresy and the sect.
(Wikipedia on Nicolaitism)

Other scholars link the sect to some later Nicolas, unwilling to accept that Nicolas of Antioch, described in Acts 6 as a man known to be full of the Spirit, could have become apostate.

There is even more debate and many more theories around the nature of the heresy.

The passage has a call to repentance and a warning as to the consequences of refusal. In this we see the same message that was given time and time again to the people of Israel – a message which is, of course, still relevant today.

The closing verse of this letter has similar form to that delivered to the Christians in Ephesus and in Smyrna:

¹⁷ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna.

I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.

Once again we see the promise of the Lord to those who hold true in the faith.

Our passage from John 6 comes shortly after the apostle's account of the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus, to avoid a crowd with incorrect worldly intentions, had gone away to a place of solitude. At evening time the disciples set off by boat to cross Lake Galilee to Capernaum rowing in rough water with a strong wind blowing. Jesus comes to and terrifies them, walking on the water, but in John's account they willingly take him into the boat after He has spoken to them and almost immediately they arrive at the opposite shore of the lake.

It is the day after and the crowd come looking for Jesus – crossing the lake in more boats which have arrived from Tiberias. It was from this crowd the question was asked which commences our reading:

³⁰ So they asked him, 'What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you?
What will you do?'

³¹ **Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: "He gave them bread from heaven to eat."**

This gives Jesus the opportunity to talk about bread – the bread of life:

³⁵ Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

³⁶ But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe.

³⁷ All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.

³⁸ For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.

³⁹ **And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.**

⁴⁰ **For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.'**

As we reflect on the warnings and promises made by the Lord throughout centuries and millennia, we turn to the second half of The General Confession:

..... But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us miserable offenders; spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults; restore thou them that are penitent; according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord: and grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life; to the glory of thy holy Name. Amen

Faithful One, so unchanging,
Ageless One, You're my Rock of peace.
Lord of all, I depend on You,
I call out to You again and again.
I call out to You again and again.
You are my rock in times of trouble.
You lift me up when I fall down.
All through the storm Your love is the anchor,
My hope is in You alone.

Brian Doerksen

Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but Thou art mighty,
Hold me with Thy powerful hand:
**Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven,
Feed me now and ever more,
Feed me now and ever more.**

Open Thou the crystal fountain
Whence the healing stream doth flow;
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through:
Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer,
Be Thou still my strength and shield,
Be Thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death, and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side:
Songs of praises, songs of praises,
I will ever give to Thee,
I will ever give to Thee.

William Williams
tr. Peter Williams