

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

Lectionary Readings: **Proverbs 3: 1-18**
 Psalm 139: 1-12, (13-18)
 1 John 3: 1-15
 Mark 10: 17-31

The Diplomat Cecil Spring Rice was posted to the British Embassy in Stockholm in 1908 - four years later he was appointed Ambassador to the United States of America.

Sometime in this period he wrote a poem entitled 'Urbs Dei' – 'The City of God'.

The poem described how a Christian owes his loyalties to both his homeland and the heavenly realm.

In January 1918, shortly before his departure from Washington and his subsequent death in February of the same year, the first verse was rewritten, focussing on 'love and sacrifice'. This was a result of the World having gone through the suffering and sacrifice of the Great War. It is in this later form that we know the poem:

I vow to thee, my country, all earthly things above,
Entire and whole and perfect, the service of my love;
The love that asks no questions, the love that stands the test,
That lays upon the altar the dearest and the best;
The love that never falters, the love that pays the price,
The love that makes undaunted the final sacrifice.

And there's another country, I've heard of long ago,
Most dear to them that love her, most great to them that know;
We may not count her armies, we may not see her King;
Her fortress is a faithful heart, her pride is suffering;
And soul by soul and silently her shining bounds increase,
And her ways are ways of gentleness, and all her paths are peace.

The final line of the poem, you will recognise, is taken from Proverbs 3 – verse 17.

In 1921, Gustav Holst adapted a melody from – a movement of his Planets Suite ('Jupiter') to create a unison song with orchestral accompaniment. He later, 1926, harmonised the melody to produce the well known hymn tune - Thaxted. (900 in the 1933 MHB but not included in our later hymn books.)

In the Proverbs passage there are other well known passages, such as that extolling of wisdom over silver and gold. (3: 13-14) Charles Wesley took verses 13-18:

- ¹³ Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding,
- ¹⁴ for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.
- ¹⁵ She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.
- ¹⁶ Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour.
- ¹⁷ Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace.
- ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed.

These verses became the textual basis for one of his hymns found at number 14 in Wesley's Hymns is in a section headed "The pleasantness of religion".

It is number 674 in H&P – The section entitled "The Christian Life – Faith and Confidence" and 500 in STF (with slight alterations), in the section - "Growth in Grace and Holiness".

Happy the man that finds the grace,
The blessing of God's chosen race,
The wisdom coming from above,
The faith that sweetly works by love.

Happy beyond description he
Who knows 'The Saviour died for me',
The gift unspeakable obtains,
And heavenly understanding gains.

Wisdom divine! Who tells the price
Of wisdom's costly merchandise?
Wisdom to silver we prefer,
And gold is dross compared to her.

Her hands are filled with length of days
True riches, and immortal praise,
Riches of Christ, on all bestowed,
And honour that descends from God.

To purest joys she all invites,
Chaste, holy, spiritual delights;
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
And all her flowery paths are peace.

Happy the man who wisdom gains,
Thrice happy who his guest retains;
He owns, and shall for ever own,
Wisdom, and Christ, and heaven are one.

Some 'modern' songs in "Songs of Fellowship" also reflect on wisdom, compared to silver and gold – for example, Lynn DeShazo's - "Lord, You are more precious than silver, Lord You are more costly than gold"

Another pair of verses, favoured by hymn writers is:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. (or, will direct your paths)

John Hartley and Chris Eaton have written (Songs of Fellowship 1917):

“I will trust in You, Lord, with all my heart, with all of my mind and soul, and in all of my ways
acknowledge You as Saviour and Lord of all.”

Psalm 139 is a very well known Psalm of David in which he declares that his life, his thoughts, his actions are an ‘open book’ to the Lord.

In STF we find (728) the very insightful and challenging ‘hymn’ written by Bernadette Farrell, based on this Psalm:

O God, you search me and you know me. All my thoughts lie open to Your gaze. When I walk or lie down You are before me: Ever the maker and keeper of my days.	Although your Spirit is upon me, Still I search for shelter from Your light. There is nowhere on earth I can escape You: Even the darkness is radiant in Your sight.
You know my resting and my rising. You discern my purpose from afar, And with love everlasting You besiege me: In every moment of life or death, You are.	For You created me and shaped me, Gave me life within my mother’s womb. For the wonder of who I am, I praise You: Safe in Your hands, all creation is made anew.
Before a word is on my tongue, Lord, You have known its meaning through and through. You are with me beyond my understanding: God of my present, my past and future, too.	

At 482 in STF we find another, short, hymn which conveys the message of this Psalm very simply:

There is no moment of my life, No place where I may go, No action which God does not see, No thought God does not know.	If I should close my eyes to God, Then I am given sight; If I should go where all is dark, My darkness is made life.
Before I speak, my words are known, And all that I decide, To come or go: God knows my choice, And waits to be my guide.	God knew my days before all days, Before I came to be; And keeps me, loves me, in my ways, Through all eternity.

The Psalm reminds us that everything about us is known to God, there is nowhere that we can hide from His presence; yet at its conclusion David expresses praise and wonder:

“¹⁷How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them!”

The NIV offers an alternative translation for the first part of this verse:

“How amazing are Your thoughts concerning me”

David goes on (verse 18):

“Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand – when I awake, I am still with You.”

Couple these thoughts with those expressed in our reading from Proverbs:

*“¹My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart,
for they will prolong your life many years and bring you peace and prosperity.”*

*“⁵Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight.” – or “He will direct your paths”.*

We remember the opening words of Karen Lafferty’s song, and make them a very personal prayer:

Seek ye first the kingdom of God,
And His righteousness,
And all these things shall be added unto you;
Allelu-, alleluia:

Ask, and it shall be given unto you;
Seek and ye shall find;
Knock and the door shall be opened unto you;
Allelu-, alleluia:

John was clearly living in an age that challenged individual Christians, as does the age in which we are living. His teaching has been centred on living a Christian life. Having earlier said that *“if any man sin we have an advocate with the Father”* he is now saying that *“no one who lives in Him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen Him or known Him.”*

Accepting the Lord into our lives brings about a complete transformation; from self centred to God centred. We, as a denomination believe the four great tenets of our faith which were expressed by John Wesley:

1. All need to be saved
2. All can be saved
3. All can know that they are saved
4. All can be saved to the uttermost

We would do well to ask ourselves how far we are, individually, along that path to Christian Perfection?

Couple this question with the passage from Mark's Gospel.

When the man, described by Luke as a Ruler, comes to Jesus with the question about obtaining eternal life, His reply is a reference to the observance of the Law.

I am always amazed at the answer given by the man – I have kept **all** of the commandments since I was a boy! How many of us could make a similar declaration?

Jesus, however, reacts lovingly towards him but sees to the heart of the problem: *“‘One thing you lack,’ he said, ‘Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’”*

We are told that the man's face fell when he heard this and he went away sad – because he had great wealth. He had come to Jesus in great confidence having lived a 'righteous' life; unaware of the problem at the centre of his existence.

Jesus astounds his disciples by saying: *“²³How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”*

“²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

What was this illustration that Jesus used? Many will see it as an example of the 'hyperbole' Jesus frequently used in His teaching – a camel, the largest mammal found in Palestine, attempting to pass through one of the smallest openings in an everyday implement – it was impossible!

Others have found or devised an alternative explanation.

When one of the Jerusalem main gates was shut at night there was a small opening for use at night. It was called the 'eye of the needle' and to get a camel through it would involve removal of any load and persuading the animal to 'lower itself' while going through the 'eye'. There is debate as to whether any such gate ever existed but some claim to have found physical archaeological evidence for such a gate, as shown in the adjacent photograph.



Whatever our explanation we must not lose sight of the central message that Jesus is giving to the 'rich young ruler'.

What is placed at the centre of your life, what is the most important thing (perhaps unintentionally or without necessarily giving it any thought?) for each one of us in the lives we live?

Do we, like that rich young man, have some 'material' attachment that prevents us from coming fully to the Lord?

We can only pray that if any such impediment exists, the Lord Himself will reveal it to us.

Charles Wesley writes:

A charge to keep I have,
A God to glorify,
A never-dying soul to save,
And fit it for the sky:

To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfil:
O may it all my powers engage
To do my Master's will!

Arm me with jealous care,
As in Thy sight to live;
And O Thy servant, Lord, prepare
A strict account to give!

Help me to watch and pray,
And on Thyself rely,
Assured, if I my trust betray,
I shall for ever die.

Eric Brown