

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

Lectionary Readings: **Isaiah 61: 1-11**
 Psalm 147: 1-11
 Luke 4: 14-21

This week the first passage to be looked at is the gospel reading from Luke. Jesus “*returning to Galilee in the power of the Spirit*”, in this account, follows immediately after His baptism and temptation in the desert. He clearly spends some time preaching and teaching (vv.14-15) and (v.23)

²³ Jesus said to them, ‘Surely you will quote this proverb to me: “Physician, heal yourself!” And you will tell me, “Do here in your home town what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.”’

The “*them*” addressed by Jesus are those in the Nazareth synagogue. He has returned ‘home’ – one Commentator suggests that it could have been up to a year after His return to Galilee. As was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. In verse 16 we note that “*He stood up to read*”.

Was it the custom for a visitor or a ‘returned local’ to be invited to read, or was Jesus expected to read from and then comment on the Scriptures because of the reputation He had established around Galilee?

He was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah – He did not choose that scroll or the words of a particular prophet, but He did select the passage from Isaiah that He was going to read; “**The year of the Lord’s favour**”, our Old Testament reading today:

Luke 4: 18-19

¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

Isaiah 61: 1-2

¹ The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
² to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour.’

At the conclusion of the reading “*He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down*”.

It may seem strange to us but we are told that in these times it was customary to stand to read Scripture but to sit while teaching:

Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5)

¹ Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside **and sat down**. His disciples came to him,
² and he began to teach them.

Jesus arrested in Gethsemane (Matthew 26)

⁵⁵ In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, ‘Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? **Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching**, and you did not arrest me.’

Paul and his companions at Philippi (Acts 16)

¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer.
We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.

This explains the second half of Luke 4: 20 – “*The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on Him*”.

We know that He started his teaching with “*Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*”.

Reading on it would appear that His words were well received, at first – then things took a decidedly unpleasant turn:

²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. ‘Isn’t this Joseph’s son?’ they asked.

²³ Jesus said to them, ‘Surely you will quote this proverb to me: “Physician, heal yourself!” And you will tell me, “Do here in your home town what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.”’

²⁴ ‘Truly I tell you,’ he continued, ‘no prophet is accepted in his home town.’

²⁵ I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land.

²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.

²⁷ And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed – only Naaman the Syrian.’

²⁸ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.

²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.

³⁰ But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

It would appear that it was mention of specific Gentiles as the focus of God's attention in the Prophets that caused the mood of those in the synagogue to turn against Jesus.

In the reference to events at Zarephath we read of **a woman, a widow and a Gentile**. One commentator has observed that in her culture, she wasn't even worth noticing then gives detail of a line from a daily prayer of the rabbis recorded in the Talmud -

*"Thank you God that I was not born a slave, a **gentile** or a woman."*

These were apparently the three worst life situations imaginable!

We remember the story of Naaman, the commander of the king of Aram's army (2 Kings 5). He suffers from a 'skin disease' and his wife's Israeli maidservant suggests he should go to the prophet (Elisha) in Samaria.

The king of Aram sends him on his way with a letter and a gift to the king of Israel requesting him to heal Naaman – a ploy to start an 'international' quarrel is suspected.

Elisha sends a message that Naaman should come to him, but then does not go out to meet him in person – he sends a messenger to say bathe seven times in the Jordan and you will be healed!

That put Naaman in a rage – aren't the two rivers of Damascus better than any river in Israel!! It is only the quiet counsel of his servants who persuade him to do this simple thing.

At the end of the story we read of a man returning home intent on worshipping only the Lord.

Jesus picks out these two – there were many widows in Israel but God sent Elijah to the Gentile widow; there were many 'lepers' but the Syrian Naaman was chosen. We, of course, know that Jesus came for Jew and Gentile alike – this indirect statement of His universal message was made early in His ministry and in His home synagogue.

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me" takes us back to the beginning of Isaiah 61, our Old Testament reading, a chapter with the NIV heading - *"The Year of the LORD'S Favour"*.

Luke records Jesus reading and then commenting on parts of verses 1 and 2.

The NIV Bible Commentary says the following about verses 1-3:

These verses present a picture of a man anointed by the Spirit of God, especially for the task of preaching (cf. 1 Kings 19:15-16). He proclaims glad tidings (cf. 40:9; 41:27; 52:7). His anointing with the Spirit of God provides a link with both the kingly and the servant prophecies of this book (11:1; 42:1). If he is both King and Servant, then already within the book of Isaiah that union of the two in Jesus Christ is anticipated.

There are many, many cross references to other passages in Isaiah, many picking up on the situation in which the people found themselves; the prophet was writing at a time of Assyrian ascendancy and political decline in Israel; before - but predicting - the eventual exile to Babylon.

Notable among the phrases we find early in the chapter and in the passage that Jesus quoted is:

*"He has sent me To proclaim **freedom** for the captives".*

The concept of Freedom is linked with the Jewish tradition (Law?) of "The Year of Jubilee" as described in Leviticus 25:

The Year of Jubilee

⁸"Count seven sabbath years – seven times seven years – so that the seven sabbath years amount to a period of forty-nine years. ⁹Then sound the trumpet everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. ¹⁰Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan. ¹¹The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. ¹²For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields.

'Jubilee' is also seen as the theme of an earlier passage in Isaiah 49:

Restoration of Israel

⁸This is what the LORD says:

In the time of my favour I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you;

I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people,
to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances,

⁹to say to the captives, "Come out," and to those in darkness, "Be free!"

They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill.

In both passages *"Release for the captives"* is seen as restoration after the return from exile. In the year of Jubilee there was a right for families to buy back, to reclaim, land that had previously been theirs. The restoration of the land in chapter 49 marked the claiming back of the land after the return from Babylon.

In many of the passages from the Prophets, read in our services, the Lord is bringing His complaint against the people of Israel who have chosen to go their own ways and ignore Him completely, or even worse turn to foreign gods. In Isaiah we find a group of chapters which repeatedly bring the promises of a faithful covenant God together with warnings to the wayward people.

NIV Headings for some of these chapters and sections of chapters are given below:

47 – The Fall of Babylon;

48 – Stubborn Israel, Israel freed;

49 – The Servant of the Lord, Restoration of Israel;

50 – Israel's Sin and the Servant's Obedience;

51 – Everlasting Salvation for Zion, The Cup of the Lord's Wrath;

52 – The Suffering and Glory of the Servant

54 – The Future Glory of Zion;

56 – Salvation for Others; God’s Accusation against the Wicked;

58 – True Fasting;

60 – The Glory of Zion;

55 – Invitation to the Thirsty;

57 – Comfort for the Contrite;

59 – Sin, Confession and Redemption;

61 – **The Year of the Lord’s Favour**

Among these chapters we find many familiar passages – related to the Messiah; the Servant; the Glory of Zion.

¹Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? (Isaiah 53)

²He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

³He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.

Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

¹Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! (Isaiah 55)

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.

⁷Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts.

Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

⁸‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD.

¹Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. (Isaiah 60)

²See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples,

but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.

³Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Returning to Isaiah 61: 1-11, a worthwhile exercise would be to take a commentary, Study Bible or well footnoted Bible and follow through all the cross references to further passages in Isaiah or other books of the Bible.

Psalms 147 is, of course, found right at the end of the book of psalms; 146-150 constituting the last Hallel (“praise”) collection. All five have the characteristics of “*Hymns of descriptive praise*”. As mentioned before there are three separate collections of “praise” psalms – the ‘Egyptian Hallel’ (113-118) which had a special place in the Passover liturgy; the ‘Great Hallel’ (120-136), sung, along with the ‘Egyptian Hallel’ during the annual feasts and the ‘Concluding Hallel Psalms’ (146-150) that were incorporated in the daily prayers of the synagogue after the destruction of the temple in AD 70.

The NIV Bible Commentary entitles Psalm 147 as “*The Blessedness of the People of God*”. It divides the psalm into three sections:

I. In Praise of God’s Restoration, Creation, and Redemption (verses 1-6)

II. In Praise of God’s Creation and Love for His People (verses 7-11)

III. In Praise of God’s Restoration, Sovereignty, and Revelation (verses 12-20)

We look at the psalm again with these section headings in mind:

¹Praise the LORD. (***Hallelu Yah***)

How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!

²The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel.

³He heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds.

⁴He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name.

⁵Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit.

⁶The LORD sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground.

⁷**Sing to the LORD with grateful praise; make music to our God on the harp.**

⁸He covers the sky with clouds; he supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills.

⁹He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they call.

¹⁰His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor his delight in the legs of the warrior;

¹¹the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.

¹²**Extol the LORD, Jerusalem; praise your God, Zion.**

¹³He strengthens the bars of your gates and blesses your people within you.

¹⁴He grants peace to your borders and satisfies you with the finest of wheat.

¹⁵He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.

¹⁶He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes.

¹⁷He hurls down hail like pebbles. Who can withstand his icy blast?

¹⁸He sends his word and melts them; he stirs up his breezes, and the waters flow.

¹⁹He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel.

²⁰He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws.^[a]

Praise the LORD. (***Hallelu Yah***)

Footnotes

a. Psalm 147:20 Masoretic Text; Dead Sea Scrolls and Septuagint *nation*; / he has not made his laws known to them

We note that each of the three sections begins with a comment or an instruction related to the people praising God.

v.1 *“How good it is to sing praises to our God,.....”*

v.7 *“Sing to the Lord with grateful praise;”*

v.12 *“Extol the Lord, Jerusalem;”*

It ends with the *“Revelation”* of the heading to the third section:

¹⁹ He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel.

²⁰ He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws.

It wasn't only revelation to Jacob - the Law was delivered by Moses to the whole people of Israel; Prophets built on it and it was completed in the teaching and Revelation of Jesus. We remember what Jesus had to say about the Law and the Prophets in His Sermon on the Mount as recorded by Matthew:

¹⁷ 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.

¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

¹⁹ Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

There is a challenge to each of us in these words of Jesus and in these readings today. The Old Testament pattern was to constantly turn away from God, only to be brought back by the words and warnings of a Prophet or the actions of a righteous king.

Since New Testament times we no longer slavishly follow the edicts of Law but place our lives in the hands of Jesus, in the Salvation found on the Cross of Calvary. It is however still very easy, like the Israelites, to neglect Him – to follow *“the devices and desires of our own hearts”*.

Let us pray that we may be able to come to Him in confession, saying *“there is no health in us”* and to turn again, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to do His and His Father's Will.

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

Man shall not live by bread alone,
But by every word
That proceeds from the mouth of the Lord;
Allelu-, Alleluia:
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia,
Allelu-, Alleluia!

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(based on Matthew 6:33, 7:7 and Deuteronomy 8:3)