

## **Sundays between 11 and 17 September, Ordinary 24 Year B**

We are now in 'Ordinary Time' again – that time of the Christian Year when (so we might believe) nothing extra-ordinary happens. Is it time for God's summer break? Or ours? In fact it's neither, of course.

Being in Ordinary Time means that we have both Continuous and Related Old Testament readings.

### **Continuous**

#### **Prov 1: 20-33**

This reading begins with a vivid image of the figure of Wisdom crying out in the streets and failing to get a hearing. The milling crowd are described as 'scoffers'. In due course (verse 27) they will panic, not knowing where to turn for either guidance or consolation. Then (verse 28) God will not answer. Now that's a snorter! Are we to imagine God with his nose (metaphorical, of course) in the air, sniffily ignoring the desperate pleas of his panicky people?

No! But that's what it will feel like. Having neglected God, ignored God, dismissed God from the reckoning, allowed the channels of communication to degrade to the point where they simply don't know how to pray or listen, *it will feel as though* God is ignoring them.

Verse 29 is particularly significant. *They hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord.* To our modern ears this sounds strange. Modern Western culture has ranged 'knowledge' and 'faith' implacably against one another – hence the dialogue of the deaf between religious and atheist fundamentalists. But the wise psalmist saw no such opposition. Knowledge and the fear of the Lord stand shoulder-to-shoulder.

#### **Ps 19**

The opening verses of this beautiful psalm were wonderfully set to music by Joseph Haydn in his oratorio 'The Creation'. The psalm falls naturally into three parts, the first being Haydn's inspiration. In the second we find a magisterial exposition of the idea of Torah, the Law as understood in the Hebrew tradition. In the final section, verses 12-14, there is a model prayer of confession. We do not know what perils lie before us on this or any day, and seek the guidance and strength of God as we navigate the hazards ahead.

### **Or**

#### **Wisdom of Solomon 7:26 – 8:1**

The Wisdom of Solomon is of course in the Apocrypha, the collection of revered books that never found their way into the Canon of Scripture. Most bibles (at least, those used in Protestant circles) do not include these books, but there are many treasures to be found there.

This reading is offered, on this day, as an alternative to the Psalm. It extols the glory of Wisdom (which has been the theme underlying all today's OT readings), a *spotless mirror of the working of God*.

In verse 28 there is a somewhat perplexing idea. *God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom*. Again we may ask is this a true likeness of God, or is it a description of what life is like for the person to whom divine wisdom is an alien concept. And if it is indeed an alien concept, how could such a person appreciate what they are missing? What could they know of the love of God? Paul addressed this problem in Romans 10:14 ff. His answer was *through the ministry of preaching*.

### **Related**

#### **Isa 50: 4-9a**

This little passage is the basis for one of the numbers in Handel's Messiah: *He gave his back to the smiters*; not a phrase that strikes home immediately in modern English!

In a slightly different translation it is also the inspiration behind a modern worship song. The theme underpinning it all is that of the inspired messenger, delivering God's message despite a conspicuous lack of natural talent and in the face of hostile violence. Read this passage alongside the gospel; its message applies to the followers of Jesus as clearly as it did to Jesus himself.

#### **Ps 116: 1-9**

The psalmist is clearly in grave peril (verse 2). But in calling upon the name of the Lord he discovers within himself an invincible confidence, looking forward to a future in which he will walk in the land of the living.

#### **Epistle Jas 3: 1-12**

James' letter is long on warnings and practical advice, short on theology. Here he warns his readers to be very wary of the dangers of an unguarded word. How often, I wonder, do our politicians (and others in public life) take heed of James' advice.

James then goes on to develop this idea of the power of the tongue. Make sure, he advises, that our tongues are used only for blessing.

#### **Gospel Mark 8: 27-38**

Mark's gospel begins with a pacey, exciting account of the impact of Jesus' Galilean ministry. Here a new and darker theme emerges. From time to time in that Galilean ministry there have been hints of trouble, watchful, suspicious figures on the edge of the crowd, doctrinal traps set for Jesus to tumble into. Jesus sees clearly that these signs are real and the threat will not go away.

Indeed, it is as that threat unfolds that his ministry will have its maximum, and intended, impact.

It happens as the little party is wending its way along the lanes of Galilee, around Caesarea Philippi. Jesus gently leads them to ask the question he knows they have been wondering about but dare not voice openly: *who do you think I am?* This conversation moves swiftly on to open the further question: *so, how is my work to reach its fulfilment?* And further still, to the question: *what might all this mean for your life as my followers?*

The answers to these questions are chilling in the extreme.