

## **Sundays between 16 and 22 October, 29<sup>th</sup> in Ordinary Time, Year B**

We are now in 'Ordinary Time' – 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.

### **OT Continuous**

#### **Job 38: 1-7 (34-41)**

At last Job gets his wish: an opportunity to hear God's answer to Job's charges against him. Here is a picture of God the great architect – an image made famous in a number of paintings and drawings by William Blake.

But of course, the conversation with God isn't quite what Job had expected. God gives Job a glimpse of what it might be like to be the Creator God. In part this reminds me very slightly of those dark scenes in James Bond novels when the villain 'invites' Bond into his secret domain and ever-so-casually demonstrates his awesome command of the engines of destruction. But in the later verses (especially verses 36, 39-41) we see that awesome power deployed in caring for and providing for the creatures with which God has populated that creation.

#### **Ps 104: 1-9, 24, 35c**

These extracts from psalm 104 echo the reading from Job. Here the focus is on the 'awesome power'.

The stories in Genesis 1-3 are by no means the only reference to Creation in the OT. It is worth reading the psalm as a whole – you will find much of it familiar! Verses 24 and 35c complete the list of God's creative achievements with an acclamation of praise.

### **OT Related**

#### **Isa 53: 4-12**

Chapters 40-55 of Isaiah (sometimes referred to as Exilic Isaiah) reflect the concerns of a people in exile and longing for the chance to return home. It is a time of reflection on the past, and on pondering the future, on identity and vocation. In this section of Isaiah it is clear that a struggle is taking place for the heart and soul of the exiled community: what kind of people are they; what is their vocation?

The Jewish 'lectionary' for Shabbat worship provides, for each Shabbat, a passage from the Torah (the Pentateuch – the first five books of the Bible) and a Haftarah, a complementary passage from the prophets (Nevi'im) or the writings (the Kethuvim). The entire Torah is covered in a three-year cycle. A few years ago I discovered that this particular passage does

not appear in the Haftarah at all, and it will not be familiar to congregant Jews unless they are moved to make a special study of the entire Hebrew Bible.

These verses are one of the so-called “Servant Songs” in Exilic Isaiah. It is difficult to detect exact boundaries for them, but this material is at its clearest in chapters 42, 49, 52 and 53. This particular ‘song’ is perhaps the archetypal OT passage that the Church has read as a “prediction” of the character and ministry of Jesus. It is tempting and easy to go down this road, but it carries the danger of investing all the rich ideas behind Exilic Isaiah in the figure of Jesus.

The key question (which can so easily be avoided if we simply reply ‘Jesus, of course’) is: Who is “the servant”? Is he a representative individual? A messiah-figure? Or do these passages represent the vocation of God’s chosen people?

### **Ps 91: 9-16**

Here is another familiar psalm, extensively used in the New Testament. Who is being spoken of in verses 9-13? Surely, in the psalmist’s mind, it is the faithful of Israel. Note that Jesus repudiated any suggestion that these verses promise insulation from all dangers (see e.g., Matt 4: 5-7).

But if we reject a literal reading of these verses (there shall no evil happen to you), what do they mean? Why does the psalmist make (or appear to make) such a claim? Passages like this one have been called to the witness-stand in support of the so-called ‘prosperity gospel’, the notion that faithfulness to God guarantees worldly wealth.

### **Epistle Hebrews 5: 1-10**

To deal with this in full would take many discussions. The letter to Hebrews, wonderful though it is, seems to come from a very different culture from our own, which makes it really hard to understand. Verse 1, for example, lays the foundations for a whole theology of sin and its remedy. Library shelves groan with the books that have been written about this topic. But does it ring true for our contemporaries? If not, can we for a moment set aside the religious machinery of priesthood and sacrifice, and get to grips with the problem it is attempting to deal with?

The writer presents Christ as a priest above all others – in our revised terms, as the solution which supersedes all others, rendering them all obsolete. Christ’s priesthood was superior because he committed himself, not an animal presented to him, as the focal point of the solution.

But the writer tries to establish also a context for this work of Christ, not only as priest in charge of a priestly act on human behalf, but as king (claiming our allegiance, in a way that a human priest could not) and son (of God – that is, reflecting perfectly the rescuing, redeeming character of God himself). Look especially at vv 5,6 which quotes Pss 2 and 110; these verses establish a link between sonship, priesthood and kingship (Melchizedek was both king and priest).

### **Gospel Mark 10: 35-45**

In the gospel for Ord26 (Mark 9: 38-50, esp. v 38f) we heard about the disciples' persistent obsession with putting people in boxes. Here this theme recurs, but the obsession is focussed now on the disciples themselves. Which box do I belong in? Jesus' response is to explain that his mission is as a servant, not as overlord.

The paintings of Jan Vermeer have aroused awestruck admiration in connoisseurs of Renaissance Art. A recurring theme in the analysis of his work is the relationship between the artist and the viewer. Sometimes the artist draws the viewer into the picture; sometimes he creates a barrier between the viewer and the subject-matter of the painting. Once or twice, though, his pictures include a mirror, hanging on the far wall, in which can be seen reflected a faint, indistinct image of a human face. Is it our own face we see there, or that of the artist himself? Probably we shall never know.

Here, as in the readings from Isaiah and Hebrews, we find ourselves in a situation similar to that of the viewer of a Vermeer painting. We are being invited into the scene. We are not simply being taught 'The Truth' about something remote, objective, distant, 'out there'. In this picture we may, if we look carefully, find a reflection of ourselves. Like the suffering servant, like the priest intimately involved in the sacrifice, like the disciples hearing Jesus describe himself as a servant, we see an image of ourselves, faint and indistinct. And the quiet refrain we cannot get out of our minds is just one repeated word: servant.