

Sundays between 13 and 19 November, 33rd in Ordinary Time, Year B

This is the last Sunday in 'Ordinary Time'.

Being in Ordinary Time means that we have both Continuous and Related Old Testament readings. (Common Worship, as used in the Church of England, works a little differently here. This Sunday is known as the Third before Advent, and the Continuous series of OT readings is dropped, which means that the reading from Ruth – for example – is not in the set of readings prescribed in Common Worship)

OT Continuous

1 Sam 1: 4-20

The selection of this passage as we approach Advent is surely no coincidence. Beyond Advent is the prospect of Christmas, and the choice of a young woman to bring to birth a very special child. Though she was not barren, she had no prior expectation of becoming pregnant. In her wonderful prayer of thanksgiving she articulated the call of God to the oppressed, the underdog, the unfavoured.

Here we find Hannah, the object of scorn and disgrace at the hands of her husband's other wife, simply because she was unable to conceive.

At the shrine of the Lord in Shiloh, Hannah is found praying, distraught and tearful. Eli the priest misreads the situation very badly; 'she must be drunk – and at this time of day too, and in this holy place; shameful!' Hannah realises what is going on, and confronts him with her shame and misery. At last (and not before time) the priest recognises Hannah's need and reassures her of God's blessing. Hannah and her husband go home to a candlelit supper (or whatever would have been appropriate at the time) and an evening of quiet intimacy. Result: Samuel!

Canticle: 1 Sam 2: 1-10

This canticle is the precursor of Mary's wonderful *Magnificat*. The resemblances are plain to see: Hannah, like Mary centuries later, celebrates the way in which God overturns human expectations and raise up the humble and meek, to sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour.

OT Related (and CW)

Dan 12: 1-3

Who is Michael? The choice of this brief extract from a perplexing book evokes a collection of deep memories, chronicled earlier in the book of Daniel, see Dan 10:21 – 11:2a. The Jewish people are caught up in a long struggle against the Persian and Greeks Empires, each at war with the other, with the Jewish people being piggy-in-the-middle, trampled underfoot like so much brushwood. Michael the name given to the Archangel held to be responsible for the defence of God's people. He is joined in this work by Gabriel. (Is it coincidence that Gabriel is held to be responsible for announcing to Mary the birth of Jesus?)

As so often in apocalyptic literature, great events in the celestial realm are matched by great events in the human world. Here the rising of Michael is accompanied by a dire prediction of terrible events – a time of terrible anguish. The dead shall be raised for judgement, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and contempt. This is a picture not of a broken society, but of a society utterly smashed to smithereens. Its members have no sense of direction, no handhold on reality – except those who are ‘wise’, who will ‘shine like the brightness of the sky’. Extravagant language indeed! The clue may be in the word ‘wise’, an attribute prized above all by the writers of the wisdom tradition – Psalms, Proverbs, and much else including the Apocrypha. For wisdom, seek the Lord.

Psalm 16

Our ordinary expectation would be that, when a new speaker is heard in a piece of writing, there would be a clear indication of this, and some reason would be given for the change. Often, however, in the Biblical tradition, these inner details are left for readers to infer. Here is an example. The voice we hear in verse 3 is that of God. It is the Holy Ones whom God regards as the nobility, and God delights in them. But the surrounding verses are voiced by the psalmist himself. Here are clues, perhaps, about the significance of ‘the wise’ in Daniel.

Epistle Hebr 10: 11-14 (15-18) 19-25

The theme here, as throughout much of Hebrews, is the superiority of Christ’s priesthood over that of the human priesthood. They offer repeated sacrifices, whereas Christ’s sacrifice is offered once, and that serves for all time.

This strategy, of using the long-established tradition of sacrifice to interpret the death of Jesus, is linked in the optional verses 15-18 with the New Covenant, under which humans who renew their covenant have in effect internalised the law, made it part of themselves – or, rather, God has written the laws in their hearts.

Verses 19-25 are rightly cherished within the Christian tradition, because, whatever we make of this link with Sacrifice (no longer a part of Judaism, since the destruction of the Temple), the death of Jesus speaks to us of a transformation of our approach to God, from one of fear to one of confidence. Paul speaks of this in various places.

The final verses remind us that there is an ethical dimension to all of this; *let us consider how to provoke one another to love*. What a remarkable coupling of words! What a text for a sermon!!
Provoke to love!!!

Gospel Mark 13: 1-8

Mark chapter 13 is sometimes known as The Little Apocalypse, because its language is quite unlike anything else in the gospel. Indeed it more closely resembles the language of Revelation or the later chapters of Daniel. It is the language of disorientation and terror, confusion and chaos. Events happen in bewildering succession, events that are desperately hard to interpret, events that challenge all our expectations of cause-and-effect, events that defy our attempts to attach meaning to them. Rumour and misinformation are rife.

And, says Jesus, that’s just for starters! (Verse 8b)

The gospel was, of course, written many years after Jesus' earthly ministry was over. Insurrection against Rome had provoked the most terrible repression. No wonder people – Christians and Jews – were finding it hard to keep a footing in this violent world. No wonder the gospel writer sought to find in the words of Jesus some comforting reassurance. It isn't easy to locate incontrovertible evidence that Jesus actually spoke words like these, ever. But there must have been memories of ideas like them with which Mark could justify this remarkable outburst.

So, where do we go with it? In our own time, in various parts of the world, Christians are suffering desperate persecution from various groupings. The world is set upon a road through dramatic and perilous scenery. Much will change, and little of it to our liking. Some may wonder: is it really worth it, to hang on to our identity as Christians?

The answer to that, surely, rests in how we view our identity as Christians. How deep does it run, in our nature? Is it something we could lightly discard and still remain ourselves? Or is it so deeply and ineradicably 'us' that we could not do so and remain ourselves? That's surely the crunch-point to which Mark was pointing: the one who endures to the end will be saved (verse 13).