

Sundays between 17 and 23 July, Ordinary 16 Year A

Returning to the mysteries of Ordinary Time brings back the pattern of Continuous and Related OT Readings.

OT Continuous

Gen 28: 10-19a

The Jewish Study Bible interprets the “ladder” as the stairway or ramp of a ziggurat, such as Mesopotamians built. God was thought to dwell at the top of such a tower.

The history of Bethel is complicated. As the “House of God” it is revered and its foundation is very properly attributed to a senior figure in the patriarchal legends – Jacob, but Jeroboam I (David’s grandson, king of the northern kingdom) built a temple there. Jeroboam was one of the bad kings, so everything he did was heavily criticised. In particular, according to this account, his establishment of a temple at Bethel was motivated by a desire to rival Jerusalem.

Ps 139: 1-11, [23-24]

There is in this very familiar psalm, a poignant mixture of calm and anxiety. First of all, in varied and vivid imagery, the psalmist conveys a sense of God knowing us and being there ahead of us (wherever we go), so we can never take God by surprise; on the contrary, it is God who always has the advantage of surprise! For several verses we aren’t quite sure whether the psalmist sees this pervasive presence as comfort or threat. Vv 6ff suggest that the psalmist is trying to escape from that presence, but finds it impossible. Perhaps this anxiety arises precisely because God is always one step ahead; there’s nowhere to hide. God always having the advantage seems to make the contest an unequal one, and this confounds our sense of fair play. These sentiments are not unlike those of Job angrily facing-down his well-meaning but inept “friends” (as a prelude to his confronting God).

In the detached verses 23 and 24 we find some kind of resolution, and again it reminds us of Job’s final capitulation before God. The psalmist accepts that his flight is pointless, his anxiety ill-founded. The presence of God is always love-bearing, the touch of his hand always kindly.

OT Related

Wisdom 12: 13, 16-19

This is a way of looking at the events of history and seeing there not God’s wrath but God’s mercy. The punishment comes in small doses, rather than overnight obliteration, precisely in order to give chance for repentance. But pause a moment. When the writer suggests that causal link “precisely in order to”, we perhaps need to acknowledge where the writer is coming from. With

a different mindset he (she?) might have wanted to suggest “so let’s repent – there’s no time like the present”.

God’s sovereignty is shown in mercy, not in awesome judgement and solemn sentence.

“Through such works you have taught your people that the righteous should be kind.”

Or Isa 44: 6-8

In this psalm (yes, psalms aren’t found only in the book of psalms) we find an emphatic declaration of God’s absolute sovereignty. God is incomparable; nothing else can be measured against god, in any way whatsoever. And for this remarkable claim, Israel is invoked as a witness (v8a)

Ps 86: 11-17

This is a lovely psalm of thanksgiving. The psalmist is secure in his faith, despite the threat of violence (v14). In verses 13 and 15 are echoes of two of the key Hebrew words used to describe the character of God: *chesed* (ch as in Scottish loch, not English cheese) (= steadfast love) and *emet* (=faithfulness) in v 15.

The first petition in v 16 (turn to me) could also be translated “face me”, “look me in the eye”; like Job (again!) we have an appeal to God’s integrity, which is, of course, being affirmed here, not doubted.

Epistle Rom 8:12-25

This reading comprises two quite distinct paragraphs. The first is about the disciplined Christian life – not a matter of intense and painful self-denial, but rather one of being led by the Spirit who is constantly reminding us that we are children of God.

In the second paragraph (remember that the original text had neither paragraphs nor sentences!) we find that Paul has switched to a different topic: sufferings (= persecution?). It includes another of Paul’s breathtaking ideas, that the whole of creation is suffering alongside us, waiting for the fulfilment of God’s intention for us humans.

There are some odd questions floating around, however. Verse 18, ends “about to be revealed *to us*”. We might perhaps read this passage as suggesting that the whole creation is waiting for us to be revealed (dressed up in our party clothes for the great feast of the kingdom), but the glory is to be revealed *to us*. What do we make of that?

Who exactly are “the children of God”? Does this refer to Christian believers? Verse 23 refer to “we” who wait for our adoption. Paul changes metaphor, and the direction of his thought, so mercurially in this passage it is not easy to keep up with him.

At the end of verse 20, running on into verse 21, we have a suggestion that perhaps God himself has subjected creation to futility (=frustration) *in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage*. Does this admit the possibility that God is “hopeful”, rather than certain, of the outcome?

Gospel Matt 13: 24-30, 36-43

This is another parable about sowing and harvesting. The story is told in vv 24-30, and it is interpreted in vv 36-43. Some scholars have suggested that while the original story was probably rooted in remembered words of Jesus, the interpretation may have been added later by someone in the early church in response to a pastoral or missionary crisis.

The allegorical interpretation offered in vv 36-43 focusses on selected elements of the story. There is no mention of the initial servants, the interval of sleep, or the fate of the good seed. The thrust is the fact that good seed is found mingled with a weed (darnel) which closely resembles it but is good for nothing. Jesus makes it clear that, however, that these two kinds of seed have different origins: the sower himself (the Son of Man), and an enemy (the evil one). The harvesting is done by angels at the end of time (v39). In the meantime, the servants are not to fret about the disorder and confusion. Rather, they are to sustain their own vocation of forbearance. Clearly this applies not only to the good seed, but also to the darnel. Then the righteous will shine like the sun.