

Sundays between 4 and 10 September, Ordinary 23 Year A

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

OT Continuous

Exod 12: 1-14

This reading tells of the institution of the Passover. It is cast as an account of what happened when the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, when their diplomatic initiative (to secure the release of their people) had apparently failed. Yet there are indications here that this account was given its present form very much later, at a time when a particular group within the Jewish community was attempting to establish (impose?) a code of conduct (in life) and practice (in communal worship), in order to bolster the community's identity and commitment to Yahweh.

For example, the reference to details of a general assembly of "the whole congregation of Israel" seems extremely unlikely in view of the tensions already in existence between the Israelites and the Egyptian authorities. Furthermore, the detailed regulations for an animal sacrifice resonate more closely with the restoration of temple worship at about the time of (or following) the Exile.

So, what was being encouraged as a central rite that defined the Israelite people? It was, of course, Pesach = Passover, the recollection of deliverance from captivity and slavery in Egypt. As verse 14 emphasises, this is a perpetual obligation for faithful Jews. Deliverance defines who they are. And in Christ, Christians make a parallel claim regarding our position before God: we are redeemed.

Ps 149

This is the fourth of the so-called Hallel psalms, each one beginning and ending with the Alleluia! In it the psalmist proclaims the sovereignty of God, in defiance of the rulers and authorities of the world. There are strong hints here of a link with the celebrations of Exodus and return from Exile, but the psalm also relates to any situation in which God's faithful people are oppressed. Perhaps that is why, in his monumental "Revelation", St John uses so often the ideas presented here.

OT Related

Ezek 33: 7-11

Ezekiel is one of the most outrageous of all the prophets. He says and does things with no regard at all for the feelings of his fellow-Jews. Like several other prophets his ministry includes the "acted parable" - the "street theatre" of his day, in which arresting actions convey a vivid message. Ezekiel's

actions are not just quaint and comic; sometimes they are also offensive, verging on the “theatre of the absurd”.

Here we get a glimpse into the source of Ezekiel’s astonishing boldness. He claims no less an authority than God himself, whose words, in turn, are motivated by a passionate anger that God’s own people have been drawn into disastrous miscalculations about what really matters in their individual and communal lifestyle choices. It amounts to an irrational death-wish: Why will you die, O House of Israel?

Ps 119: 33-40

Veterans of church choirs will remember with fondness the words with which this psalm begins, words which were beautifully set by the eighteenth-century composer Thomas Attwood. But this is not about happy memories of choir practices; it is about how to live the good and holy life. And in doing so the psalmist echoes the concerns of Ezekiel; the prevailing culture is misdirected, misguided in many of its choices, and the devout psalmist asks for God’s help in turning his back on the decadent and corrupt values of his contemporaries.

We have choice thrust upon us, these days. The market can (and will) supply our needs (we are assured). But do we know the difference between a need and a desire? Even to raise the question will call down indignant remarks about nanny states and arrogant interference. The psalmist reminds us that, although we have choice, we may not have the wisdom to make consistently good choices.

Epistle Rom 13: 8-14

Paul is also concerned (as he always is towards the end of his letters) with the practical outworking of the gospel in people’s lives. The governing principle, Paul argues, is love – a theme central to his correspondence with the awkward squad in Corinth.

Like Ezekiel and the author of psalm 119, Paul presses upon his audience the need to respond urgently to the realities of life. He couches this in terms of the impending day of judgement (the day is near), but the underlying intention can also be expressed without recourse to metaphysics: sort yourselves out; get your act together; accept the obvious truth that the decadent popular lifestyle is profoundly harmful both to individuals and to the health of society (verses 12, 13)!

Paul does offer a down-to-earth practical answer to this problem: “put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh”). Here we need to read Paul’s words with a little care. He’s not saying that when there’s no more bread in the larder we shouldn’t go out and buy more. His target is the lifestyle of indulgence and wild living that would laugh God out of court.

Gospel Matt 18: 15-20

There are many texts which Christians habitually misapply. The final verse of this reading is one such. "Where two or three are gathered" is not offered as a consolation when the evening service is poorly attended. It is a summary of the preceding discussion about resolving disputes.

We are reminded of the need for "due process" in the way we deal with disputes and offences within the life of the church, beginning with the private conversation (avoiding humiliating public exposure), going on to the small gathering of a few wise individuals, and culminating in a hearing before the whole church community.

Clearly this does not attempt to sidestep the course of legal proceedings regarding the rights, privileges and duties of citizens and who should enjoy them. It is about the governance and discipline of the church. In a first-century context, of course, only the Roman Citizen had significant rights to due process. So the church is guided to set and work to a higher standard than the prevailing culture.

All this points, of course, to a setting for this teaching which belongs to the age of the church rather than to the age of the disciples following Jesus around Galilee.