

Sundays between 18 and 24 September, Ordinary 25 Year A

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

OT Continuous

Exod 16: 2-15

One of the characteristics of the people of God is that they complained (or “murmured” as one translation has it). They were the bane of Moses’ existence. Even when our vocation is clearly from God it isn’t necessarily a comfortable fit!

The word “manna” means, simply, “what on earth is this?” It is interesting to see how the word has acquired a rich blend of very different associations as it has taken its place in our secular vocabulary!

The detailed regulations for collecting and consuming the manna clearly reflect a concern that people should observe the Sabbath. While this echoes the fourth commandment (Exod 20: 8-11) the way that law has been elaborated into rules for avoiding work on the Sabbath suggest that this story comes from a later time when such matters of minute detail were seen as of great importance to the identity of God’s people.

I have been very struck by the word given by God to Moses and recorded in v. 12: *in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.*

Ps 105: 1-6, 37-45

A later liturgical poem celebrating the exodus, and mentioning specifically the provision of bread and meat.

OT Related

Jonah 3:10 - 4:11

The story of Jonah reaches its climax, with the Ninevites repenting and being forgiven, much to Jonah’s irritation! A little imagination might suggest Jonah’s musings as he begins his vigil in the shade of his booth. “Right, God, they’re your problem now. I’ve done what was asked of me: over to you; let’s wait and see how things turn out, shall we?”

The phrase “the Lord God appointed a bush” is an illustration of the dilemma that bible scholars call “the divine passive”. We can’t say “it so happened that – at least, not without some qualification”. Stuff doesn’t “just happen” if you believe in an all-powerful God. There is a choice of how one’s ideas about causation can be expressed. Either (as here) you say directly that God did it; or else you say “it came to pass that ... ” as a coded way of saying that God did it.

To the bush, then. Whatever the cause it appeared and gave Jonah more shelter, for which he was grateful. But then his luck changed. The bush withered, after an attack of some pest; and the sun grew more intense, exposing Jonah's head to the scorching rays.

There are moments when the OT depicts God as "putting a bit of stick about" simply in order that people should realise who's boss. In this story, God makes the point that if Jonah is entitled to care about the bush (in his own interests, of course) then so is God entitled to care about the Ninevites.

Do you find in this story an example of God "coming on strong"? How does it relate to our world? Is it a picture of God that many people would find congenial?

Pslm 145: 1-8

This psalm of praise ranges from the personal "I will exalt you" (v1,2) to the successive generations who will pass on to one another the story of God's mighty and glorious acts. In v6 the psalmist seems anxious to identify himself with this great praising company.

The refrain at the end of this psalm is found in quite a few places in the psalter. No accident, this; it is a refrain always on the lips of the Jewish faithful, as is the Muslims' description of Allah as "the compassionate, the merciful" and the Christian's understanding that "God is love".

Epistle Phil 1: 21-30

Only a little beneath the surface of this passage there lies Paul's concern that the good news of the gospel is to be received and shared by the company of God's people. Being a Christian is not simply an individual matter; it is for the whole united company of believers. Christians belong together, in a church, for it is in the fellowship of believers that we find fellowship and support. But beyond that, in the modern context and in Paul's first-century churches, the fads, fashions and strengths of individual congregations and denominations need to be understood against the background of the *whole* company of believers, *standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel*.

The Philippians – and we too – are called to the privilege not only of believing, but also of suffering for him as well.

Gospel Matt 20: 1-16

What can one say about this remarkable story? These men were doing what everyone did in those days – they went to the labour exchange, the marketplace; they were job-seekers. Some worked all day. Others spent most of the day waiting and hoping; their actual working hours were very limited. But in the end they received the same pay as those who had worked all day.

How would a modern Trades Union leader react to this? Perhaps he might notice that Jesus seems to be advocating a job-seeker's allowance which is in fact the equivalent of the going rate for agricultural work.

The parable seems to suggest (v6) that in his final visit to the marketplace the employer collected together everyone who was still looking for work and set them to help complete the day's schedule of tasks in the vineyard. What it doesn't say is whether any of those who were left unemployed in the recruitment exercises at nine, noon and three had by five o'clock simply given up and gone back home.

The thrust of the story (v15) is God's freedom from any human concepts of "fair play". Could it be that he employed this last tranche of recruits - as the light was fading - simply so that he could pay them a day's wage?

I have at home a book called *Farmer's Glory*, in which Arthur Street recounts his early days in Wiltshire, when the number of people employed on the land was vast in comparison to today. Further mechanisation has changed the face of agriculture and of other industries too. Global economics seems to militate against the man - or woman - whose work is easily replaced by a machine. Mechanisation is always available to help reduce operating costs if workers demand too much. In this story I see a corrective: the spoils of greater efficiency are not to be divided simply on the basis of the work people have done.