

Sundays between 25 September and 1 October, Ordinary 26 Year A

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

OT Continuous

Exod 17: 1-7

Again the people of God are heard murmuring (or, complaining); they really are giving Moses a hard time! In response, God directs Moses to go on ahead, with some of the elders, and to strike the rock with his staff. Water poured from the rock, satisfying the people's angry clamour for water.

Water resources have long been a critical feature of life for the peoples of this tract of land. The Feast of Booths, Succoth, which features strongly in John chapter 7, commemorates the hazards of travel in a dry and thirsty land. In dire times people can react irrationally. Here they call in question Moses' leadership in bringing them out of Egypt where at least they had food and water.

Aligning oneself and one's community with the kingdom of God does not lead to a hazard-free prosperity. There may be moments when outward circumstances might suggest revision of those key decisions of life. Such times will probably involve barely-tolerable stresses.

Two things follow from this. The toll that these hard times take on the individuals who experience them is not simply a matter of the externals; the heart, the morale, suffer too, and it is this that causes some people to "go under". The greatest security in these circumstances is found in paying attention to our relationship with God, as Moses did. And given that the body of Christ is indeed a body - a community matter - then it is for the community - for us - to support folk who are undergoing these times of difficulty.

Ps 78: 1-4, 12-16

This psalm evokes a picture of a society in which the telling of treasured stories was the only form of entertainment. In our era of multi-channel TV there are few experiences that can be said to have been shared by an entire society. Watching the Olympics may have been one, but not everyone shares that particular enthusiasm.

But in the world inhabited by the psalmist storytelling is central to community cohesion and the transmission of traditional values. The stories of the journey across the wilderness are among the stories retold time and again as "bonding agents", enabling succeeding generations to "belong" in the fullest sense.

OT Related

Ezek 18: 1-4, 25-32

This passage is one in which Ezekiel rises to the very heights of his inspiration. He denounces the culture of inherited guilt which condemned the children of a wrongdoer to a blighted future regardless of their own character. Personal responsibility cannot be evaded; everyone must confront the opportunity to decide how to live, whether to live righteously or not (using bible-language). These things are not inevitable; they are not programmed into us either by our genes or by our upbringing (to use a more modern model of explanation).

Parenting is a hard and demanding business. Not all parents are good parents. Some do not have what it takes to see it through. For some the particular burdens of a child's disability or unruly behaviour prove too much to handle. Many of the young people who fall foul of the law do so because their experience of family life has not offered them a good model to live up to. Yet the law cannot recognise such early misfortune as excusing later anti-social behaviour. Each person bears the responsibility for his or her own conduct.

The other side of this coin means, however, that society has no right to "write-off" such young people in advance. Relating this to what we observed in relation to the Exodus reading above, it is a community matter to create an environment in which help and support are on offer, as well as the clear guidance about what behaviour is unacceptable and why.

Ps 25: 1-9

In the context of today's lections the verse that stands out from this psalm is verse 6: *remember not the sins of my youth*. Ultimately, there is here yet another angle on responsibility. If guilt and moral failure are not predetermined by our ancestry, then neither is virtue. In the end we all stand before God, all capable of greatness, all liable to fail. Only the key relationship with God can be relied upon to direct us in the right path.

Epistle Phil 2: 1-13

We love to sing Charles Wesley's great hymn "And can it be". In verse 3 of that hymn Wesley celebrates the teaching of Paul in this very chapter. "Emptied himself of all but love". This has led to one of the most significant ways in which the church has tried to understand fully the mission and ministry of Jesus. He emptied himself of all the trappings of divinity in order to identify fully and unreservedly with humanity's sorry plight. It is indeed a wonderful picture, but it works in a literal sense only if you take as your starting point that Jesus shared the trappings of divinity from the outset; only if that is true could he set aside those trappings.

So how can it work other-than-literally? Why not start from a slightly different point, that God addresses the sorry plight of humanity not from a position of affronted dignity or the anger of a crossed megalomaniac. God

brings to the table nothing but love. Start from there and it becomes possible to re-think our human situation – including human suffering – in a quite radical and more hopeful way.

Gospel Matt 21: 23-32

This passage begins with one of those stories about Jesus that arouse our admiration at his ability to “think on his feet” and so outsmart those who were trying to trap him. They had decided to withhold their approval from both Jesus and John. Here Jesus challenges them to justify their position, by asking whether John’s ministry was inspired by God or not. They take refuge behind a shrug of the shoulders and a plea of ignorance: “we don’t rightly know”.

In the second part of the lection Jesus tells a story about a man who had two sons. He asked both to help out in the vineyard. One said “shan’t” but later changed his mind and did; the other said “no problem” but forgot. This is in fact the first of a series of parables that address the dithering of the religious authorities, their tendency to hide behind traditional interpretations, that was evident in the previous paragraph. Had Jesus been speaking today he might have said to those religious authorities something like: *“Come on now; it’s not rocket science – tax collectors and prostitutes have got the point; why not you?”*