

## **Sundays between 2 and 8 October, Ordinary 27 Year A**

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

### **OT Continuous**

#### **Exod 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20**

Who would have imagined that this passage of scripture would find itself the subject of litigation in the USA, when Christians took issue over their right to display the Ten Commandments in public (i.e. state) schools? It is surely reasonable to ask whether such court action is more accurately regarded as on the one hand a demand for a return to traditional moral values, or on the other hand as an insistent affirmation of traditional identity.

The Decalogue (= "ten words") can be seen as comprising two groups of five. The first four are clearly about theological values, the supremacy (for the children of Israel) of their identity as worshippers of Yahweh. The last five (from "murder" onwards) are clearly about how the people should behave towards one another. The fifth - honouring parents - seems on the face of it to belong in both categories. A moment's thought, however, will enable this to fall perfectly into place. Parents are God's agents in the rearing of children, so to dishonour a parent is tantamount to dishonouring God. As so often, statements of this kind are double-edged; they serve not only as a reminder to children to behave well towards their parents, but also as a reminder of the high privilege and responsibility of parenthood. In one sense this commandment ties together the theological and ethical strands of the Decalogue.

In Jewish tradition this passage contains thirteen *mitzvot*, the first being the preamble *I am the Lord your God*; this has given rise to a variety of traditions about how the thirteen are to be grouped into ten. The Jewish tradition groups our first and second together: you must worship the Lord your God and God alone; you must not even create (let alone worship) anything that you might be tempted to set alongside God or even (horror of horrors) above God.

The final commandment (coveting) deserves at least one brief note. The word "house" would be better rendered as "household", more clearly applicable to a nomadic context; what follows (wife, ox, ass, etc) simply spell out the implications of that "household". This allows us to avoid (at least to some extent) derisive comments about ranking a wife on a par with a donkey.

Notice in verses 18-20 the way the people are instinctively fearful of God. Moses' response seems strange; Is God truly relying upon fear to ensure our compliance?

#### **Ps 19 [1-6], 7-14**

The Covenant, on which the Decalogue is grounded, is itself rooted in the notion that God – Yahweh – is the Creator of all things, responsible for a settled order and for giving humanity clear guidance about how to live in that settled order.

### **OT Related**

#### **Isa 5: 1-7**

The readings today are centred upon this vivid (and quite clearly metaphoric) image of the vine, an image taken up by Jesus in our gospel reading and also in John 15. At first sight this is a delightful image, evoking memories of warm sunshine and convivial occasions. Its implication, however, is richer and more complex. We are reminded that the vine is an economic entity; it is not planted, nor is it tended, for its beauty, but rather for its fruit. A vine that produces a poor crop, or no fruit at all, is a waste of time and resources; its fate is clear.

Why does the frustrated landowner decide in the end to write off not only this vines but the land on which they were growing? It would seem his expectations and anger were directed first towards the vine, but in the end the problem lay deeper. As Kenneth Williams said many times (in the person of Rambling Sid Rumpo) “the answer lies in the soil”. Should we be exploring other connections – perhaps with the parable of the sower (some fell on stony ground)?

#### **Ps 80: 8-16**

The Psalmist takes up the theme of the vineyard, but with a slightly different take on it, mid-way, perhaps, between that taken by Isaiah and that taken by Jesus in the gospel reading. For the psalmist as for Jesus, it is the people to whom the care of the vine has been entrusted – it is they who are letting the side down. Judah/Israel, now firmly established and settled upon its inheritance (a land flowing with milk and honey) is likened to a prize vine transplanted from a hostile environment in Egypt and now provided with everything that could be desired for its wellbeing, prosperity and lush growth (vv 10-12). But their leadership has been deficient. They have failed to defend boundaries (v13). (What might that mean in practice? For them? For us?)

#### **Epistle Phil 3: 4b-14**

Paul is conducting a very careful balancing act here, as he does in the epic letter to the Romans. On the one hand he needs to affirm the value of the Jewish religious inheritance; it is, after all, the inheritance of Jesus himself, and it also provides the resources through which Paul himself interprets the events of Jesus ministry, especially his suffering, death and resurrection.

Into this mix he must also fit his own experiences of rejection – often violent rejection – as he switched his passionate allegiance from Judaism to Jesus, and as he has gone on to preach the gospel. Paul’s testimony, which he invites his

Philippian readers to share (and us too) is that all these negatives, all the losses he has experienced, the bereavement experience of forfeiting his respected place among the Jewish leadership – all these he “counts but loss”. For Paul it is Christ who makes sense of everything, Christ who sums up everything, Christ is the one to whom all his treasured heritage has been pointing, Christ the fulcrum around which his entire world revolves, Christ the focus and centre of the community to which he belongs.

Yet, thankful though he is for all of this, he remains conscious of being on a journey of becoming – a journey which is not yet complete.

### **Gospel Matt 21: 33-46**

The conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders is clearly heading to some sort of a climax. In this reinterpretation of the parable of the vineyard, it is the staff who are charged with tending the vines that are subject to judgement. It is inconceivable that his hearers could have missed his point (see verse 45).

Once more we have to ask the question: when exactly was this written? Does it embody the actual words and intentions of Jesus himself? Or could it be the product of a later church setting in which Jewish rejection had left bitter memories. There was, after the destruction of the temple in 70CE, a virulently anti-Christian sentiment among the Pharisees, which led to open hostility between church and synagogue. It could be that these words reflect a need to express Jesus' own concern for the plight of his second-generation followers. Matthew might have intended to declare that Israel's privileges are now transferred to the Christian community.

This raises the question of who we as Christians view the bible, pointing up the dangers of taking it too simplistically as the Word of God. We should not, out of politically correct sensitivity, deny to Matthew the right to say what he meant to say, but nor are we obliged to hear his words as necessarily directed at us. Perhaps, like Paul, we are required both to cherish the tradition from which Jesus came, and give Jesus himself first place in our personal allegiance.