

## **Sundays between 9 and 16 October, Ordinary 28 Year A**

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

### **OT Continuous**

#### **Exod 32: 1-14**

This incident, of the “Golden Calf”, is emblematic of the condition of dissoluteness that can come over a society that encounters crisis but lacks serious direction.

But there is more when you look deeper. Moses is “away on business” for forty days and forty nights. Without him, the people have no access to God. Aha! Aaron is Moses’ brother – he’ll do. “Make gods for us”. So begins a rivalry between Moses and Aaron, who have different visions of leadership in the community. In the course of the story, Aaron assumes all the trappings of spiritual leadership, but without God’s authority for doing so. Yet later on Aaron is chided severely, but no catastrophic fate befalls him. Instead his priesthood is affirmed, retrospectively.

Back, though, to that the people having no access to God. Evidently they thought that was so important that they had to invent a substitute. It is not easy to see further behind the front-story of the golden calf. One possibility is that this story represents the deep distrust of fertility-religions such as the Canaanite religion, which offered people direct control over the fertility of their fields, without recourse to God at all.

Much of this reading is given over to an account of a private conversation between God and Moses. Moses placates God by reminding God of God’s promise of deliverance. “Why do you want to write off your investment in this people?” As so often, we need to ask ourselves not “did that really happen?” but “what lay behind this story that it was written up in this way? what does it mean?”

It could be a reminder that God’s “hot anger” is a reality that must be factored into human calculations and plans. It could be an open endorsement of Moses’ (as opposed to Aaron’s) leadership.

#### **Ps 106: 1-6, 19-23**

The second part of this extract from Psalm 106 echoes the story of the golden calf, and links it specifically with the worship of images of real creatures.

### **OT Related**

#### **Isa 25: 1-9**

The writings of the prophets do include some passages that closely resemble psalms. This is one of them, and it is a great psalm, permeated with a sense of

fulfilment, of a long period of waiting about to come to a wonderful conclusion, the covenant with God about to culminate in eternal peace.

Chapter 24, in complete contrast, has been about God's judgement – a truly spine-chilling chapter. It ended, however, on a note of promise; the Lord will reign. Chapter 25 holds us in the tension between these two moods. Naively we talk of carrot and stick. More seriously we ponder the relationship between what we perceive as God's judgement, and our understanding of God's love.

Vv 7,8 express a deeply held human belief that the extent and depth of suffering in human experience cannot be the real truth about us and our destiny. There is in the human heart a longing for hope. Whether this is in itself evidence for the *reality* of hope is another question. The fact remains that humans long for hope and respond when they are offered real hope. The message of Isaiah here, surely, is consonant with the whole of scripture: only a hope grounded in a secure relationship with God can possibly be authentic.

### **Ps 23**

The best-known of all the psalms, this one invites us to try to hear it afresh, without the baggage it has collected over the years. Frequently associated with the funeral service, its message of quiet confidence has much wider application.

The opening phrases remind us that because the Lord is our shepherd, want (=need) is a stranger to us. God's unfailing kindness will pursue us all our days. His table is spread as an invitation to reconciliation. None of the fear-inducing events of life carries any threat for the one who trusts God.

### **Epistle Phil 4: 1-9**

So the sunny and upbeat letter to Philippi comes towards its end. There is real affection in the way Paul addresses this community (v1). Note particularly his utter confidence in the two women who share in leading this community. Paul usually names those in whom he has confidence; when he wants to criticise severely, he does so without naming names.

There is no sense of grudging here, no sense that the part played by these two women in leadership has been a stop-gap measure. True, they have not always agreed (v2), and one is tempted to wonder why. Paul's response, besides urging them to resolve their differences, sets this dispute (whatever it was) in the context of the whole life of the church. Disputes damage the life of the Christian community. I remember a Christian group in my student days (long, long ago!) that as a matter of policy refused to hold elections for their Committee, on the grounds that this smacked of disagreement. The matter was settled privately in what we might call "prayer-filled rooms". Here, however, Paul is not prescribing the method by which reconciliation is to be arrived at; he merely says "do it", emphasising that it is a community responsibility for the community's health and well-being.

The NIV refers to a (singular) “loyal comrade” or “yokefellow” but has a footnote suggesting the word might be a proper name: Syzygus. There is, however, no contemporary evidence that this word was ever used as a name. Paul’s reference to “brothers and sisters” (NRSV) is worth exploring in as many translations as you can. It may owe more to the anxiety about inclusive language which motivated those who prepared that particular edition; an earlier edition of NRSV uses the word “beloved”, neatly avoiding both the issue and the more strained usage: “brothers and sisters”.

Paul’s encouraging words in vv 4-9 have found a place in many people’s treasuries of favourite quotations from the bible – and rightly so. His words about rejoicing and not worrying have prompted many a sermon! Verse 7 has an honoured place in our Christian worship; it is very often used as part of the closing blessing. His injunction to focus our thoughts on the positive and the wholesome is the counterpart of his advice to the Corinthians that love takes no pleasure in the sins of others (1 Cor 13:6) but loves the truth.

### **Gospel Matt 22: 1-14**

This parable of the great feast leaves us with many questions. The invited guests seem more intent upon their private business than on the invitation to a lavish royal banquet. Our minds’ eyes may be filled with images from television programmes about how a royal banquet is prepared in one of our royal palaces; place-setting are laid out with meticulous care, each guest surrounded by a stunning array of cutlery and fine glassware, every piece placed in position to the nearest millimetre. Could it be that these invited guests felt they would be out of place in such surroundings? Could they perhaps have felt too humble to mix in such company?

The etiquette of our time requires us to respond (RSVP) in good time for the food to be ordered and preparations made on the correct scale. Here, however, cooking is nearly complete, and all that is required is the arrival of the guests. But they don’t turn up. Those sent to press home the invitation are treated to yobbish violence. The king’s angry response is entirely understandable! What is Jesus trying to tell us about God? Or is he simply making a point about the boorish insolence of those invited to the king’s table (no less)?

The final paragraph of this reading comes from a different part of the tradition, and is not necessarily something Jesus actually said on the same occasion. The earlier story about the king’s feast makes no mention of a wedding. Here however it is a central element in the story. We are not to assume that this man who turned up in jeans and a T-shirt was one of those summoned off the streets in verse 10. It’s a different story. This man was invited; he knew what sort of a “do” he was invited to; he knew and understood the dress-code for the occasion, but still he “dressed down” in a way that amounted to a gratuitous insult to the host and the other guests.

Refer back to verse 10, where the slaves are reported as gathering all they found, *both good and bad*. Admission to the Great Feast of the Kingdom seems to be wide open to all, not limited to those who have lots of gold stars on their Sunday School Attendance Card. Stand by for surprises, as our expectations are blown apart!