

Sundays between 16 and 22 October, Ordinary 29 Year A

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

OT Continuous

Exod 33: 12-23

Having led the recalcitrant people through many hardships, Moses once again meets God “face to face” (but note v20). Moses returns to his demand to know God’s name, which he had first raised at the scene of the “burning bush”. God’s response is to promise his “presence”.

Moses seems to take that as a necessary “given”: no presence? no action; here we stay. But Moses is nothing if not persistent. Once again, like a cracked gramophone record he deploys the same tactic as he had done at the burning bush; he needs some kind of authentication: how shall it be known? And then a new theme emerges from the back of his mind (Is Moses thinking on his feet?): the presence “going with us” is what does and will make this company of people a distinct race unlike any other. It is an identifying mark. Notice that we’re not hearing, here, any talk of circumcision. For Moses the distinguishing mark of the people (plural) is the presence of God with them.

In the final part of this remarkable story, God offers a partial surrender. He will proclaim the name “The Lord” and show Moses his goodness. But his face may never be seen.

It is a truly remarkable insight into the relationship between humanity and God. Moses demands; God listens and responds, but God’s face remains beyond the reach of human sight. At a trivial level this story is almost incomprehensible; what meaning can we attach to it? It stands, however, as a story that we can relate to the entire history of humanity. The transcendent remains ultimately hidden; there is, about all human discovery, a sense that something is being disclosed in an act of grace.

Ps 99

Clearly a liturgical poem, with a refrain (of sorts) at verses 5 and 9. The Priestly tradition in the OT doesn’t include Moses as a priest at all. His presence in this list is therefore an indication that this fragment doesn’t come from that tradition. Samuel’s presence too is interesting because, although he did at some points intercede for the people (see 1 Sam 19: 5, 9 and also Jer 15:1) it is not on that that his reputation primarily rests. Also interesting is the fact that God did not appear to Samuel in a pillar of cloud! A rather motley bunch, then; so what links them? They were all responsible for leading the people in testing times, when community coherence was of prime importance. The people gave every indication that they would fail such a test; the role of the leadership in sustaining and strengthening the bond with God was vital to sustaining the community.

OT Related

Isa 45: 1-7

This appears to be a speech in which God addresses Cyrus, a Persian ruler who changed the character of geopolitics by defeating the Babylonians (who had sacked Jerusalem and exiled Jewish leaders). Cyrus ruled with a rather lighter touch, allowing provincial autonomy – not, probably, because of his humanity but simply because as a realist he knew that he couldn't expect to hold a sprawling empire together simply by brute force. His vassals would remain under reasonable control, and his empire would remain more stable, if those vassal peoples realised there was “something in it for them”.

But here, according to Isaiah, God is celebrating Cyrus as “the Lord's anointed”, God's chosen deliverer to rescue his people once again from a very uncomfortable situation. The basic message is abundantly clear from vv 6,7. A few years ago a representative of the more extreme neo-conservative wing of the Bush administration stated boldly that “we create reality”. He was referring to the situations in the Middle East over which American dominance was being asserted. Here is a reminder to everyone engaged in global politics, that ultimate power rests elsewhere.

Ps 96: 1-9, [10-13]

Sing to the Lord a new song! So what was the old song? A plausible guess might be that the old song was about fear, about constantly looking over your shoulder just in case the local god had “got out of bed the wrong side” that day. The new song, by contrast, is about a God of wonder and glory and salvation, a God who should be known the world over by all creatures – and with joy, not dread.

It is possible to read psalms like this one as if their trust was “my God is boss” – a kind of cultural jingoism. But surely the point is a more subtle one. There is nothing to fear in a creation which God has declared “good”.

Epistle 1 Thess 1: 1-10

When a church is calling a new Minister, surely this is the kind of endorsement it would like to see. Look at the words Paul uses: work of faith; labour of love; steadfastness. Reports from this community have reached the furthest corners of the Empire, causing the name Thessalonica to be celebrated everywhere. They are hospitable; they received the word of God with joy; they are paragons among the scattered young churches of the Mediterranean basin.

Is there a catch? Does Paul turn from praise to criticism? Well, in truth, no he doesn't – except to warn them about the dangers of getting over-excited about the imminent coming of Jesus.

This is among the earliest of Paul's letters to the churches, so perhaps Paul later developed a slightly more jaundiced view of the churches he planted. But this letter is so positive and so glowing that perhaps our response should be: if only we could be like that.

Gospel Matt 22: 15-22

This story stands high in the list of Jesus' clever responses to the challenges posed by his critics in the Jewish religious hierarchy. The controversy lay in the taxing problem (irony intended!) of how to manage dual allegiances: to Caesar, by right of force Emperor; and to God. Jesus seems to drawing a line between two separate realms, two spheres-of-influence, challenging his opponents – and us – to learn to live in the real world and manage how we reconcile the two sets of demands, not allowing one to extinguish the other.

It is a problem that is far from being confined to the matter of principle: are we obliged to pay taxes to the state? It embraces such issues as the distress that can arise when we see our taxes (local or national) being used to pay for things of which we don't approve.

Behind this controversy, of course, was the figure of Caesar, around which was gathered a panoply of "terms of magnificence". Caesar was the bringer of peace, the son of god. All the gospels recall spoken words of Jesus, some of which were re-tuned (while remaining entirely consistent with those remembered words of the Lord) to meet the needs of late-first-century communities of Christians. The message of the church was that these titles apply in their fullest proper sense to none other than Christ. While our Christian allegiance is undoubtedly to him, we cannot use it as a way of ducking the issues about the state which may be at the same time our defender and our oppressor.