

Sundays between 23 and 29 October, Ordinary 30 Year A

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

OT Continuous

Deut 34: 1-12

Here we read of the final episode in Moses' relationship with God. The great prophet and leader – who had led the people through troubles and hardships of many kinds, was not permitted to enter the land that God had promised. We do not know why this privilege was denied him, what sin he had committed, beyond a brief reference in Numbers 20:12.

A Midrash “on the Death of Moses our Teacher” develops this tradition in various ways. First it deals with a mutual confession by Moses and the people. Rather oddly, Moses confesses that in teaching them Torah (“the Law”) he has laid heavy burdens on them; they forgive him. In turn the people confess that they have given Moses a lot of grief; he forgives them.

Then the Midrash returns to the theme of God's relationship with Moses. It is here that Moses' fault is pondered. God has already forgiven him six sins: refusing to answer God's call (Exod 4:13); accusing God of making matters worse (Exod 5:23); testing God twice (Exod 16: 29,30); slandering God's chosen people twice (Num 20:10, 32:14). This debate goes a little further; Moses' response is described as one of “unconcern” – he did not pray. God has forgiven the people many times; surely he will forgive me too. But God is quite determined; Moses throws a tantrum and God orders the gates of heaven shut against his prayers.

Returning now to the biblical text we see that there is support for some of that midrashic development. Moses does make peace with the people he has been leading all this time. They mourn his death, and Joshua his chosen successor affirms his greatness.

Ps 90: 1-6, 13-17

In verses 4-6 of this psalm we find words that have become familiar as we have sung them on Remembrance Sunday every year.

Verses 1,2 affirm God's trustworthiness in a way that reminds us of the vast stretches of time that ran before even the world was formed – a very modern view of God's relationship with Creation. Verses 2-6 set up a profound contrast with this God whose vision spans such vast tracts of time and such an immense universe. We humans are transient specks of dust, animated briefly then returned to dust, or like the grass that flourishes in a rainy season but withers in a prolonged drought. It's a picture of human relationships with God that offers no consolation or comfort.

Yet in final extract from the psalm in our reading today – verses 13-17 – we find a quite different picture: it is personal, intimate, caring (though the memory of affliction cannot altogether be erased, v15).

OT Related

Lev 19: 1-2, 15-18

It is fascinating to read the book of Leviticus and discover the source of some of Jesus' own teaching (love your neighbour as yourself, v18). There is also a surprise to be found in verse 15: you shall not favour the poor. How can this be consistent with the churches' recent insistence of "God's preferential option for the poor"? Think, however, of the vast difference between court proceedings 2000 years ago and today. Litigation is settled by hugely expensive debates between highly skilled advocates before a judge. The skills of an advocate can present a case in such a way as to affect the final verdict. Those skills can be bought with money, to which the poor do not have easy access; recent attempts to curb public expenditure have further limited the options open to a poor person in dispute with his wealthy opponent. Two thousand years ago, we may reasonably suppose, advocacy played a less important part in the process; it was up to the judge, and this injunction on strict impartiality is directed to such a judge in such a system. Today we might say that we get the justice we can afford, and that is why a more nuanced approach is right. Strict impartiality is hard to achieve if one litigant has millions of pounds at his disposal while the other can barely scrape together enough for a preliminary consultation with a solicitor.

Ps 1

How often our recent lections have underlined the central importance of our relationship with God cultivated by our study of the scriptures! Here again, to give God the full attention of heart and mind even for a few minutes (let alone "day and night") in the face of such daily chores as dealing with the incoming mail (both paper and electronic) and juggling with the television schedules, the video recorder and our social diaries. Yet this psalm – at the very beginning of the psalter – sets out its stall very clearly: that is how to prosper – not in the narrow monetary sense but in the much wider sense of well-being or shalom.

Epistle 1 Th 2: 1-8

Paul clearly loves the Thessalonians to bits. Memories of his time with them are evidently sunny ones, in contrast to those of his time in Philippi. Somehow Paul seems to have been able to set aside those painful memories and approach Thessalonica with a totally open mind, prepared for anything but assuming the best. He approached them not as a tradesman selling a product, but as a friend who desperately longs to share with them the good news of the gospel. And in this case his approach was richly rewarded.

Gospel Matt 22: 34-46

It is interesting to see how differently Matthew and Luke treat this little exchange between Jesus and a lawyer about which commandment is the greatest. At first glance it's the kind of question we might regard as a "no-brainer", one to which the answer is so blindingly obvious that we sense there must be a catch – why ask that question at all? Whereas Luke extends the conversation by having the lawyer ask the supplementary catch-question "Who is my neighbour", which prompts the parable of the Good Samaritan, Matthew has Jesus respond with a question of his own: Whose son is the Messiah? Why, David, of course, comes the reply. And Jesus bounces back with another rejoinder of his own: how come David is recorded as addressing the Messiah as Lord?

This is a characteristically Rabbinic way of proceeding, which doesn't really cut much ice with a 21st century Christian audience. It refers to Ps 110:1. Ps 110 is interesting and puzzling. Its text is notoriously confused and confusing, yet it is the basis of much Christian thinking about Jesus. Verse 1 is used no less than 37 times in the New Testament, and will surely have appeared frequently in Christian liturgy!

It is important to remember, first, that in a Semitic context "son" means more than biology and physical lineage; it has more to do with character, the category to which one belongs and whom one obeys. Matthew's church and the local rabbis (descendants of the Pharisees) were, unsurprisingly, locked in controversy about whether Jesus was the Messiah. In such a debate, where do titles like "Son of David" and "Son of God" fit in? What does the use of those titles actually mean? Jesus sets them a question that tests their skill as expositors of their own scriptures. And they fail miserably. They cannot see (according to Matthew) the clear implication that the Messiah is both Son of David *and* Lord.