

Sundays between 30 October and 5 November, Ordinary 31 Year A

CW: Fourth Sunday before Advent Year A

(alternative provision if All Saints readings were used on 1 November)

OT Continuous

Josh 3: 7-17

This story embodies two fragments of tradition. First, there is the public proclamation (by God) of Joshua as the appointed successor of Moses. God will be with Joshua as God was with Moses. The sign to this effect is akin to the parting of the waters of the sea of reeds (the Red Sea) during the headlong dash from Egypt; the moment the priests, bearing the Ark of the Covenant, set foot in the Jordan, the waters will part, and the waters upstream will stand in a single heap. Verses 14 to 17 describe how this divine promise is fulfilled.

The other fragment is one I personally find deeply disturbing especially when it is applied uncritically (i.e. without thinking) to a very different set of circumstances. Verse 10 (in the modern Jewish translation) declares that "God will dispossess for you the Canaanites, Hittites etc. etc." Is God the defender of the dispossessed or not?

To this dilemma we can respond in a number of ways. We can argue that God will do what God wills, and sometimes that's real tough. Or we can argue that this was written many centuries later and with the benefit of hindsight. "We won, and we thank God for it. Too bad some folks got killed." But is this an account of what God really did, or of how people rationalised what happened in the light of their faith in a covenant God?

Our picture of God, as defender or oppressor, can change over centuries of human history. The world's communities of faith include representatives of a variety of positions in relation to this puzzle. Who knows how the balance might shift in the future.

Ps 107: 1-7, 33-37

This psalm of redemption and return from exile is very moving but, like the reading from Joshua, it contains some provocative images. Verses 33-37 suggest a God who can and will despoil the landscape, and restore it, according to the moral qualities of its inhabitants. Verse 34 refers to "the wickedness of its inhabitants". Verse 36 (an almost direct echo of Joshua 3:10) declares that "there God settles the hungry" – in the very place that was turned from fertile land into bleak salt desert in the immediately preceding verses.

Again we are faced with various ways of reading this text. We may choose to read this literally, as evidence of God's direct miraculous intervention. We may choose to see here a phenomenon we know ourselves: the landscape blighted by human greed and carelessness, hasty action without thought. A

third perspective is that the description of the blighted landscape is a metaphor for the land – the nation – brought to its knees by prolonged godlessness.

OT Related

Mic 3: 5-12

Verse 5 presents something of a problem. Perhaps the most effective translation is found in the Jerusalem Bible: *So long as they have something to eat, they cry "Peace", but on anyone who puts nothing in their mouths they declare war.* This suggests that these prophets are motivated only by their personal bottom-line, their personal profit. If their tables are groaning they will prophesy in the way their clients want, but if their larders are bare they will mount a PR campaign against those responsible. See again, v 11.

Covering the lips is a sign of mourning, confirming their chagrin because their supposed wisdom has failed them.

From verse 8 the speaker is the prophet himself, supremely confident in his own call from God.

This passage, particularly verse 11, recalls other passages from the prophetic literature in which the "true prophets" are pitted against "false prophets" – the ones who will give favourable oracles to their clients so long as the money flows in. Each side is completely confident; so how is the listener to decide between them. Which of them is selling healing balm, and which is selling snake-oil?

Ps 43

Throughout the bible we can see evidence of humanity wrestling with the most profound questions about God and God's relationship to the human world. Here we have a catalogue of misery, punctuated by occasional outbursts insisting that we, God's people, have been utterly faithful to the covenant. "All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you, or been false to Your covenant." In the final verse the psalmist reminds God sternly of God's declared steadfast love and faithfulness. In effect, the psalmist seems to be saying to God "put up or shut up". Where does that fit in our spirituality?

Epistle 1 Th 2: 9-13

Verse 9 offers us a reminder that Paul was (in modern parlance) a non-stipendiary minister. He was not actually paid by the congregations he established and to which he ministered. But before we get carried away, let us remember that Pauls' financial priority was for the poor Christians in Jerusalem who were getting the really rough end of the stick (a concern which came to the fore a little later in Paul's story).

Verse 13 focusses our attention on a theme we found in Micah. When (as yet) there is no evidence one way or the other, how do we decide between that

which is authentically God's word to us, and that which is "merely" the product of the human mind? In pondering this we must be careful not to disparage the human mind, which is in many ways quite the most wonderful part of God's world. The products of the human mind include the discoveries of science and their application to good (and evil, of course); great art and music, the waging of war and the forging of lasting peace agreements. It is truly a mixed bag, but it is undoubtedly a gift from God - so let's not rubbish it!

So what constitutes "the word of God", that the Thessalonians received so readily? For them and for us, this has to be the entire content of the Jesus story, from beginning to end.

Gospel Matt 23: 1-12

Question: can you detect here influences from the late first-century church? To what extent were these words accurately-remembered words of Jesus himself? Look at verse 10.

There are many stories in the gospels in which Jesus is reported as castigating the Scribes and Pharisees for their excessive concern for formal purity and attention to the detail of the Law. Here the focus appears to be upon their concern for their own status. They might well reply (if they were able to understand the conventions of the modern armed services) that the respect which they were expecting from ordinary people is no more than the salute that an officer expects from one junior to him in rank. There's nothing personal about it - indeed the salute is not offered or expected if the officer is not in uniform; what is being acknowledged in the salute is the Queen's Commission. Perhaps the wise among the Pharisees would agree; what they are expecting is the respect due not to themselves personally but to the office they hold and the sacred tradition they represent.

Jesus (?) then turns to the application of this teaching to the conduct of the disciples themselves. He urges them to shun the use of honorific titles and signs of dignity - anything that might draw attention to themselves and away from Christ.

CW Matt 24: 1-14

As the gospel story approaches the Passion, there are several passages in each Gospel where the tone is one of foreboding. The reference to the destruction of the Temple (verses 1 and 2) suggests at the very least that this remembered saying of Jesus would have been more deeply impressed on the minds of Jesus' followers when, in 70CE, an insurrection against Rome failed miserably and the city was razed to the ground. The insurrection failed partly because of its unfortunate timing. It was a moment when a new Emperor needed to make his mark, and the easiest way to do so was to identify a dissident group and flay them with maximum publicity, as a warning to others.

Did Jesus, in roughly 35 CE, foresee these events, which took place in the period 66-70 CE? Or are we seeing here a memory of something Jesus did say filtered through the dreadful experiences of 70 CE and interpreted as 'prediction'? From the standpoint defined by the question: *What did Jesus actually say?* to the question: *What does this picture-story mean?* there is a long journey. Strictly, we cannot answer the first question at all – unless, that is, we accept that he did indeed say exactly these words. But to do that doesn't close down the conversation, because the second question remains. It rapidly mutates into a further question: in circumstances like these, how did the tiny community of the friends of Jesus retain and sustain their faith in him and his way? It is a question which has never ever, at any time in history, been irrelevant.

The Gospel continues with the lesson of grievous turmoil being applied directly to the life of discipleship. It is perhaps here that we are entitled to believe that there was indeed a remembered word of Jesus which, in the hands of the Evangelist, took the form we find in our Gospel. Reading it again we may well exclaim: you call this good news? It could hardly be worse! Yet the Gospel enjoins Christian disciples in all periods of history and very varied situations to remain faithful in the face of these horrors.