

Sundays between 13 and 19 November, Ordinary 33 Year A

Returning to the mysteries of Ordinary Time brings back the pattern of Continuous and Related OT Readings. In addition, on this particular Sunday, the Continuous series of OT readings offers two alternatives both for the main OT reading and for the Psalm (or Cantic). Again, Common Worship makes no use of the RCL *Continuous* OT Readings.

OT Continuous

Judges 4: 1-7

This marks the beginning of a remarkable tale. Its end is shockingly gory – involving a tent peg! What may strike us as remarkable is the very prominent part played by women – and not in the kind of tender, kindly role with which women are often stereotyped. Deborah is one of the few “Judges of Israel”, while Jael is one of those women celebrated for their hands-on action in defence of their people.

“Judges” were not primarily people who adjudicated between disputing parties: “I find in favour of ...”. Rather, they were people who, like prophets, saw clearly what was going on, and provided wise and fearless guidance and leadership to God’s people. Judges were people who could read the signs of the times more clearly than other people.

We may be inclined to dismiss the bible as deeply patriarchal, constricting the role of women. Under this view, every sign of prominence given to women is seen as a concession by men (who still hold the levers of power and authority). In this passage (among many others) we see an ineradicable tradition to the contrary; that the gifts and leadership of women are not to be caged, domesticated, tamed or any such demeaning thing.

Ps 123

This little psalm doesn’t go in for lengthy over-dramatic histrionics. It is direct and straightforward. Perhaps the most moving line is in verse 3: “we have had more than enough of contempt”. (This translation, incidentally, is found in both the NRSV and the modern Jewish translation).

While it is good for us to identify ourselves with the psalmist, it is surely right also to put ourselves in the shoes of everyone who has had “more than enough of contempt”.

OT Related

Zeph 1: 7, 12-18

This is a spine-chilling prophecy of a day-of-judgement that will assuredly come. In Italy many churches are decorated with frescoes depicting scenes like these. These frescoes are a kind of graphic bible, reminding the illiterate faithful of the fate that awaits the sinner.

In verses 10 and 11 are references to various parts of Jerusalem. Verses 12-18 spell out not only what awaits the inhabitants of the city, but also the wrongs for which they are being punished.

“Resting complacently on their dregs” is a phrase drawn from the wine-making business. New wine was allowed to stand with the sediment for long enough to enrich the wine, but at a carefully observed moment the wine is drawn off (to avoid its becoming too syrupy) and the dregs discarded. The prophet is castigating people who are not on the lookout for that crucial moment when the wine and the dregs should be separated.

Verse 13 looks very much like a criticism of speculative investment!

Ps 90: 1-8 (9-11) 12

This psalm has figured no fewer than three times in the lectionary for Year A. Its theme is a reminder that we humans should take ourselves and our achievements less seriously, see ourselves in a wider context. Ultimately, we are dependent upon God for our satisfaction (v14). Interestingly, the aim of such satisfaction is that we should rejoice and be glad all our days. This is not, of course, an argument for turning off the news with its gloomy reports of economic meltdown or harrowing tales of starving children. The biblical perspective may be more limited geographically and ethnically – there is no urgent plea for the poor and oppressed peoples of other vassal provinces of the Babylonian empire – but the overall message is clear: to love God and your neighbour will bring joy.

Epistle 1 Th 5: 1-11

As we have seen over recent weeks, Paul thought highly of the Thessalonians. Yet he did feel a need to damp down speculation about the return of the Lord – the “second coming”. All that he is willing to guarantee about it is that it will take his readers by surprise “as a thief in the night”. But from there he draws an important lesson. Such calculation of times and seasons leads inevitably to a conclusion: if we know that the second coming will happen at a particular moment of time, then every other moment can safely be declared a time when we can be off our guard. Like coastguards and the crews of search-and-rescue helicopters we are always on standby, ready at a moment’s notice to respond to whatever may happen; that way, says Paul, we can be confident of our response to the Lord’s return.

Gospel Matt 25: 14-30

The parable of the talents.

A merchant banker entrusts some money to members of his staff and gives them a free hand to become entrepreneurs. Being a shrewd fellow, he has already assessed the potential of his people to succeed in this. He therefore doesn’t give them all the same amount of money. But they are all set the same task: go ahead, build a business. Some of them succeed and are able in due

course to bring back a 100% return on investment for their boss. One of them, however – and he was the one about whom the merchant banker was most uneasy – he gave him less capital to start with – was completely fazed by the responsibility entrusted to him. He didn't start a business; he didn't even put the money in the bank; instead he just buried it, so that in the worst-case scenario his master would have his original investment intact. He gets a roasting from the boss, because he was so risk-averse, so terrified of risk, that he simply did nothing with what was given him.

When we read this story it is ever so easy to be blinded by our perfect hindsight. We all know what's coming: two of the managers bring back huge profits, one is a complete and utter failure. It is easy to overlook the fact that at the outset we have absolutely no idea what their plans were – these three who, it seems, had entrepreneurship thrust upon them. At the beginning of the story we have no idea how these people would have fared in Dragons' Den – the TV programme in which experienced financiers evaluate new business proposals. They were all in the same position; for each one of them the way ahead was risky. And one of them chickened out.

So where does that leave us? Are we, in the church, too risk-averse? Are we too fearful of failure – failure to bring about church growth, failure to please influential people, failure that leaves us personally with embarrassing egg on our faces?