

## Readings for Ordinary 1 Year B, 7-13 January

Immediately after the feast of the Epiphany the Revised Common Lectionary, as used in the Methodist church, moves into Ordinary Time. The Anglican Church uses the same readings, but designates the first Sunday after Epiphany as commemorating the Baptism of Christ.

### OT

#### Genesis 1:1-5

Look at these verses in as wide a range of translations as possible. They will reveal a much more complex picture than can be derived from our memories of, say, the Authorised Version of the Bible (now known as the King James Version – KJV). In particular, it is clear that the plain statement “In the beginning God created ...” is not really adequate to capture the subtleties of the text as regards time. Here are two alternatives:

NRSV: In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said “Let there be light”; and there was light.

Jewish Tanakh Translation: When God began to create the heavens and the earth – the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep, and a wind from God sweeping over the water – God said “Let there be light”; and there was light.

It is clear that Genesis does not claim – at least, not directly – that God created from nothing. Take the NRSV translation; does the word “when” signify a period before, or after, God did the creating?

The first action attributed to God is that of dividing light from darkness, day from night. Our cosmology presents us with a picture in which the very existence of night and day depends upon the existence of a sun, and the earth spins daily on its axis giving (at any point on earth except the poles) alternating periods of night and day. These concepts make sense only on a planet like our own; what sense could it make elsewhere in the universe? In the Genesis account the sun and moon do not appear until verse 16. It is clear, therefore, that Genesis is not talking exactly the same language as we do.

The importance of a distinction, however, is something that proves to be very important throughout Jewish history. Much of the Levitical Holiness Code, for example, aims to safeguard divinely ordained distinction between men and women, human and animal, clean and unclean animals, the sacred from the profane, and so on.

The light, furthermore, was pronounced good. This distinction between day and night, therefore, represents rather more than appears on the surface. It also hints at good and evil.

## **Psalm 29**

This psalm celebrates God's power, glory and honour. That was easy to explain. But, as so often in understanding the Bible, we need to ponder a question. What lay behind this all-embracing affirmation of God's power? Was there a rival God, who drew people away from Yahweh, so that the psalmist needed to issue this strong corrective?

Yes, there was the Canaanite religion of Baal, a fertility god. Translated into modern terms, Baal resembles the gods of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries: production and consumption. Read against that sort of background, this psalm packs much more punch, doesn't it?

So, why read this psalm on the Sunday after the Epiphany? Epiphany is about the presentation of Jesus to the Gentile world. A few turned their heads, at least momentarily. But what of the great majority? And in today's world how does Jesus compete with the prevailing secular deities of science and technology, individualism and choice, economic efficiency and shareholder value? Are those indeed the modern counterparts of Baal?

## **Epistle: Acts 19:1-7**

In my former life as a University teacher of Computer Science – and particularly in the seventies and eighties – one of our problems was the mixed-ability group. Perhaps “mixed-experience” would be a better expression, because all the incoming students had an adequate level of achievement at ‘A’ level. But some had done ‘A’ level computing while others had not, and some were keen hobbyists (and in a few cases, highly competent hobbyists at that). Addressing such a wide range of prior knowledge of the subject in one class was quite a challenge.

Hold that in mind as you read this passage, and you may see the kind of challenge that Paul faced. Here's a group of people who had received baptism from a disciple of John the Baptist, but who knew nothing of baptism in the name of Jesus. Paul's response is swift and informative. John's ministry was in fact to point to Jesus, he told them, and went on to baptise them in the name of Jesus. What followed was typical of the specific (as opposed to general) conversion-stories in Acts: tongues and prophecy.

Were these signs simply being reported in such a way as to confirm the authenticity of the baptism experience? Is today's church at fault in not expecting similar consequences as a matter of routine? Have we banished such events to some realm of “more primitive religious experience”? How is all this related to the Baptism of Jesus himself?

## **Gospel: Mark 1:4-11**

This passage introduces the bizarre figure of John the Baptist and integrates him into the narrative of Jesus. John is depicted in a way that would immediately evoke memories of some of the prophets of the Old Testament.

In particular Elijah, it was believed, would return to announce the coming of the Messiah.

It is interesting to reflect on the fact that at the time when John was doing all this locusts-and-wild-honey preaching the people were groaning under Roman rule. It doesn't seem plausible that a call to repentance would quite fit the bill. But when a cataclysmic change is in the offing (which is exactly what John is announcing) it is surely appropriate that people are called to take a radical look at their assumptions about their lifestyle. Think outside the box. Think the unthinkable. That way your heart and mind might just be ready for what is about to hit you!