

## Readings for Ordinary 3 Year B 21-27 January

Immediately after the feast of the Epiphany the Revised Common Lectionary, as used in the Methodist church, moves into Ordinary Time.

OT

### Jonah 3: 1-5, 10

The book of Jonah is a wonderful symbolic story about a man who ran away from God because he knew what God wanted him to do – preach repentance to the great (and wicked) city of Nineveh – and he wasn't inclined to go down that road at all! The way he did choose, however, did not bring him peace; rather it brought him problems and grief. So in the end Jonah capitulated and went to Nineveh. In these few verses we read of Jonah's mission. He warns the Ninevites; they repent on the instant and God changes his mind. The scheduled punishment is withdrawn.

These verses are of course a very tiny part of what the book of Jonah has to say. But we are invited on this day to ponder this fragment of the tale. "We have a gospel to proclaim", sang the hymn-writer. The reaction of many of us is not far distant from that of Jonah. Today's world has several ways of dealing with a problem we don't want to deal with right now. We talk about displacement activity, procrastination, flight.

Like Jonah we often feel the message won't be kindly received by the target audience; on the contrary, we expect jeers and hostility. So we do *something* else; head off *somewhere* else.

Later on in the book of Jonah, of course, there's the vexed question of Jonah's exasperated response to God's forbearance – but that's another story!

### Psalm 62: 5-12

There is here an abundance of vivid imagery: God as rock and fortress; those of high estate depicted as "lighter than a feather", insubstantial. As so often in the psalms we find a message that invites us to see the world in a quite different light. Now in the autumn of 2008, verse 10b seems sharply apposite: if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

### Epistle: Hebrews 6:17 – 7:10

The second part of chapter 6 sets out the grounds for trusting God. While we might not find this argument persuasive for us, we need to recognise nevertheless the way in which it might well have been persuasive for the first readers of this letter.

The first part of chapter 7 sets out a different line of argument, centred on the mysterious Melchizedek. Whether this was a real person, or angelic, or purely mythical or legendary, the stories that surrounded Melchizedek provide a framework against which we can read the story of Jesus. Technically,

Melchizedek is a *type* of Christ, a model or pattern whose study can illuminate for us the meaning of Jesus himself.

The thrust of these two “steps in the argument” is towards the claim that Jesus Christ, as both High Priest and Sacrificial Victim, meets human needs more effectively than any temple sacrifice.

Clearly, modern readers must address this question. What, if anything, lies behind this talk of sacrifices, that carries weight in our very different world?

### **Gospel: Mark 1:14-20**

A few decades ago we grew accustomed to stories about computers that sent bill for £0.00 and followed them up by final demands on pain of prosecution. It is a commonplace of today's world to read of a satnav system that has sent a credulous motorist (or truck driver) down a very unsuitable road. Sometimes costly machinery has to be called in to extricate people from the folly of taking their satnav uncritically.

The Gospel reading brings us back to language we can understand. Repentance may not be a word that is familiar in our world, but the idea behind it is certainly accessible. If we are headed down the wrong road, the best thing to do is to repent – change mind, change plan, change direction, and go a different way.

The narrative goes on to record the occasion when Jesus summoned four fishermen to change the direction of their lives entirely. The way this story is told invites us to believe that this meeting was the first between Jesus and this little group of fishermen. Some scholars suspect that behind this episode lies a growing friendship and perhaps even a prearranged plan; perhaps this call was an awaited signal that the time had come for action, turning the plan into reality.

Whichever interpretation we find more persuasive, there is here a reminder that our life, the life of our church, the life even of our nation, sometimes needs a mid-course correction. Such a change may be dictated by simple prudence that resonates easily with human wisdom. But sometimes the change called for is dramatic and challenging, imbued rather with the voice of courage and daring. Follow me!