

Readings for Ordinary 4 Year B 28 January – 5 February

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

OT

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Behind this passage lies a significant turning-point in the history of the Hebrew people. During their wilderness years they have become accustomed to receiving the guidance of God through the medium of pillars of cloud and fire, and through great noise which terrified them. The technical term for such events is “theophany”.

Now the story moves on. The word of God is communicated through the words of a prophet. True, they already have a prophet – Moses – but here they are assured of continuity: God’s guidance will not fail them.

Later on in the history there is an episode where once again noisy theophanies are superseded. Elijah could not hear the voice of God in the fury of the storm, but only in the quiet whisper of the breeze. There is throughout the Bible this theme of overturning people’s expectations about how God would make Godself known.

To use a modern metaphor, God is rolling out Broadband, but not for special effects; rather, so that God’s quiet, gentle voice can be heard, free of the distortions and misperceptions that have resulted from God’s earlier communications technologies.

Psalms 111

This psalm needs little explanation. Though it is full of reminders about the goodness of God which we can see in and through a variety of human experiences, its essential message is not a catalogue of ideas to be processed by our thinking mind, but a litany (how sad that this word has become most familiar to us through the cliché “a litany of failure”) – a litany of reminders of God’s goodness which should prompt our gratitude.

Epistle: 1 Cor 8: 1-13

At this point the Methodist usage differs from the Anglican lectionary which offers Rev 12: 1-5a.

Our Epistle is taken from Paul’s first letter to Corinth. Paul is trying to deal with a crisis that has arisen, essentially because of socio-economic divisions within the little Christian congregation. Some of the wealthy members had become accustomed to a particular kind of social life, which included dinner parties given in the precincts of pagan temples – a bit like having lunch at a cafe run by a town-centre church, it didn’t necessarily imply adherence to that particular set of religious beliefs. This group within the Corinthian

community were trying to integrate their new Christian faith with their previous lifestyle, and thought themselves rather superior for having done so – as they thought, creatively.

Paul here reminds them that what is important is not their skill in navigating the cultural hazards of the Corinthian world, but the integrity and fellowship of their little church. It is their shared responsibility to ensure that everyone within the church is acknowledged as a fellow-Christian, whether or not everyone is able to see things as they themselves do. Their conduct in continuing with their social life as if the gospel had had no consequences for them was in fact threatening the faith of other Christians who did not – and never could – belong to their “posh” social circle.

Gospel: Mark 1:21-28

It has become a commonplace of television series that each episode begins with a brief résumé of “the story so far” so that viewers can settle in to the ongoing drama with some understanding of what has happened in the past.

Mark’s gospel certainly begins with a bang. He begins not with a look backwards, but with a look forwards. In short order we are thrust into the heart of the action, into the cut and thrust of the controversy that will unfold over the next ten chapters or so.

No sooner has Jesus called the first core of his team of disciples than he sets out his stall, first as the master of the world of evil spirits. From the vantage point of twenty centuries we may chuckle indulgently at the ignorance and credulity of Jesus’ contemporaries; surely these “evil spirits” are what we now know as mental illness? Perhaps that is so, but there is another element at work here. It hardly needs to be said that medicine in general, and psychological medicine in particular, has now a much better picture of what can go wrong with the human body and the human mind than was possible in the first century. Afflictions such as this individual suffered from might now be easy to diagnose and treat; in Jesus’ time there were simply mysterious and inexplicable except as divine punishment for some supposed offence.

In this story, then we are invited to see Jesus as the victor of evil, and (or perhaps “or”) victor over the unknown and little-understood influences on human well-being. Jesus is positioned as conqueror of all that denies life.

He caused a sensation. Such a claim could not but be seen as a challenge to the religious authorities, who saw themselves as exclusively responsible for such matters, leaders in the struggle against evil and all that pollutes. New readers start here!