

Sundays between 4 and 10 February, Ordinary 5 Year B

Immediately after the feast of the Epiphany the Revised Common Lectionary, as used in the Methodist church, moves into Ordinary Time. The scene begins to move towards Lent, Easter and the story of the Passion.

OT

Isa 40: 21-31

Humanity can reckon many stupendous achievements to its credit: great engineering projects to span a gorge, set human feet upon the moon, understand at least something of the mysteries of evolution, scratch the surface of the atom and its constituent particles. Sadly many of these achievements have brought in their wake unforeseen troubles; but nevertheless they are real and worthy.

Isaiah wrote against a backdrop of international power-politics. Israel and Judah, once a united power that could punch above its weight in “global” affairs, are now divided and weak. Its leaders are anxiously watching to see what the current set of movers and shakers are going to do – not least, to these two little kingdoms.

Isaiah points out that great empires come and go; we mustn’t expect the geo-political scene to remain unchanged for long. The one “power” that transcends all these human rulers is God, the one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and indeed, the God of all these proudly warring tribes. Those who in their lives and lifestyles recognise God as their Lord need have no fear. They need never cower or fear collapse.

Ps 111: 1-11; 20c

This psalm sustains the broad theme of the passage from Isaiah while setting a more tender tone. God’s people really are suffering hardship, growing old without dignity. Look at verse 6. Doesn’t it remind you of the Magnificat: *God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty?*

The psalmist wants to root his trust in ancient traditions. There were promises, and God is a promise-keeping God. *That* is the ground of hope, not some a human scheme, however clever and prudent it may be.

Epistle 1 Cor 9: 16-23

Some of Paul’s Corinthian friends were very proud of themselves. As intelligent Christians they regarded themselves as having been liberated from ideas and taboos that still held captive others among their fellow-Christians. But their conduct was at fault in two ways. First, they took no account of the effect on others of their freedom. A major theme of this letter is that they should learn to show care for these their fellow-believers. Second, they did not see how stark was the contrast between their self-proclaimed freedom and the self-surrender that was absolutely central to the life and ministry of Jesus;

their failure to take account of this causes Paul to wonder whether they've really "got the point".

Freedom is a privilege, Pauls maintains. It is not to be exercised either for self-indulgence or even for the proclamation of "freedom in Christ". Freedom is a gift to – and for – the entire Christian community. Christians are free (from haunting fear and anxiety – yes, and guilt) so that they can open hearts and hands and houses in genuine loving hospitality for others. This may begin with the Christian community, but no final limit is set upon it.

Gospel Mark 1:29-39

Last week's readings began Jesus' ministry with a bang. The "overture" to the gospel continues with no lessening of pace, energy or challenge. Jesus is Lord over "unclean spirits". Later, Mark will bring forward evidence that Jesus is Lord over the world of nature. Here he gives us a clear statement of Jesus' Lordship over human frailty and sickness. Overall the message is clear: Jesus is Lord.

In John's gospel the sheer extravagance of God's love is shown in the transformation of an enormous quantity of water into fine wine. Here in Mark the same point is made through the healing of any and all who come out of need.

A third theme emerges here in Mark's account of "the beginning of the Good News". This spectacular launch of Jesus' ministry – and indeed the whole ministry here heralded – rests not on some quirk of human character whereby Jesus' nature is extraordinarily outgoing and vivacious, energetic and "giving". It rests wholly and solely upon Jesus' intimate relationship with God. No formal prayers these, as recited in synagogue assembly (worthy and helpful though they no doubt were). Mark hints at, but cannot reveal, this intimacy. We are left to wonder. And in our wondering we may wonder whether the intimacy he knew could ever be open to us.

Perhaps the answer to such speculation must lie in our future reflection on the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus had only recently asked his disciples whether they could share the cup of suffering that was to be his. They averred that indeed they could. But even as Jesus re-enters that intimate space with the Father, his disciples' commitment fails them and they fall asleep. The intimacy and the cup are "together bound", as Fred Kaan invites us to sing in one of our hymns.