

Fifth Sunday in Lent Year B; the First Sunday of the Passion

We come now to Passiontide. The readings for this Sunday and next, try to cover the heavy ground of the events surrounding the death of Jesus. This Sunday is known as Passion Sunday, simply because for most of us next Sunday is Palm Sunday and the following Sunday is Easter. So on this Sunday the central concern is the Cross.

Jer 31: 31-34

It may come as something of a surprise to Methodists familiar with our Covenant Service, that as we approach the Passion this reading turns up, which is one of the lessons set for that service. Yet a moment's thought will reassure us how exactly right this is. Because (for Christians) nowhere is God's faithfulness to the Covenant more emphatically stated than right here in the dramatic and world-changing events of Holy Week.

Jeremiah's reluctant ministry as a prophet was conducted against a backdrop of suspicion and false hopes. "No, it will never happen" (it being the great catastrophe of invasion and mass deportation to exile in Babylon). Jeremiah, like all the prophets, saw things clear, and his message was not popular - which is of course why Jeremiah has such a reputation for spreading misery.

But even Jeremiah has his moments of sunshine, and this is one of them. He looks forward to a day when that Covenant is no longer a written document, carefully preserved in a sacred box in a synagogue or temple, but is written on people's hearts. In modern language it will be "internalised", deeply ingrained in us, so they cannot forget it. They will know, without needing to have it spelled out for them, the everlasting love of God - and what God expects of them.

At its best the Old Testament is in remarkable accord with the Christian Gospel; they are deeply consistent, rather than one being a forecast of the other.

Ps 51: 1-12

This, the classic psalm of penitence, has often been linked with David's remorse over his disgraceful treatment of Uriah and Bathsheba. Whether that be true or not, it has always been at the heart of Christian penitential liturgy.

The psalm speaks of a profound sense of self-disgust; an equally profound longing to be "clean"; a ready acknowledgement that only God can renew a right spirit within; and a firm confidence that God will indeed restore peace to this deeply troubled heart.

It is indeed a passionate expression of a particular spiritual journey, which may be followed by many but not necessarily by all. Its emotional excesses will make many feel a bit uncomfortable. But let it stand as a reminder for all

of us that we depend for our inner peace on the renewal of that “right spirit” within us, and for that renewal we can turn only to God.

Or Ps 119: 9-16

This rendering of the same sentiments comes to us as the delights of the dessert course after the gruel of Psalm 51. In both psalms we can find an echo of that internalisation of which Jeremiah spoke as the hallmark of the new devotional order. And even here the psalmist does not exude complacency. In verse 12 he asks God to teach him (more about?) his statutes. However far we have travelled along the road, there is more to learn.

Epistle Hebr 5: 5-10

The figure of Melchizedek looms over the text of Hebrews. If ever there was a shadowy figure of legend in the Old Testament it is this one. Melchizedek appears in only two verses in the whole of the OT – Genesis 14:18 and Psalm 110:4. He was a priest-king of Salem (Jerusalem?).

Abraham (or rather Abram, for at this point he had not been given his new name) had rescued his nephew Lot from some local warlords. A great peace conference then took place, with some other warlords who had been Abram’s allies in this adventure. There was some haggling over booty and recompense and Melchizedek appeared bearing gifts and blessings.

The point of the story, for the writer of Hebrews, is that Melchizedek blessed Abram, the greatest of prophets; therefore Melchizedek is “superior to” Abram. Melchizedek, therefore, is the one to whom we should look for a “type”, a model, example or simply precursor, of Jesus.

Gospel John 12: 20-33

In this fascinating vignette we come at last to the moment which, right from the very beginning, has been the “elephant in the room” for the writer of the Fourth Gospel: Jesus’ “hour”. Typically the other gospels use the metaphor of time to refer to the second coming of Jesus (see for example Mark 13:32-37). But for John this refers to a very particular moment, the moment of his glorification on the Cross.

Intriguingly, in John 2: 4, at the wedding at Cana, Jesus tells his mother that his time has not yet come. It seems that “his time”, carrying as it does the awful freight of Jesus’ own destiny, approaches inexorably and he, Jesus, can do nothing but wait. Here in chapter 12, however, he turns the whole thing on its head by saying “... I have come to this hour”. All along, it seems, Jesus himself has been managing his approach to this hour.

Verse 24 has prompted theological reflection, and sermons without number, ever since the dawn of Christianity. The single grain, a biological structure which in itself embodies an intricate beauty – let alone the enormous amount

of genetic information – must in fact experience its own destruction if its destiny is to be fulfilled.

In verse 32 we see a mirror of the “snake on the pole” image, which figured in last week’s readings Numbers 21:4-9 as well as in John 3:14. When Jesus is lifted up – now on the cross – the result will be that people are drawn to him. The outcome will be healing for those who are so drawn. Healing and wholeness will come from the building of a community around the person of Jesus.

Evening Lections

Exodus 7:8-24

This lection is in two parts. In the first part Moses, the reluctant leader, is schooled into apparently magical arts in order to persuade Pharaoh to release the Hebrews slaves. In the second part we see the first part of the extended confrontation between YHWH (acting through Moses and Aaron) and Pharaoh himself – the first and second of the ‘plagues’.

The first ‘plague’ is not really a plague at all in the sense that applies to all the others. It is a miraculous contest between the ‘magic’ of divine power made visible in the amazing antics of Aaron’s staff, which the magic of Pharaoh’s advisers cannot match.

In the second plague the river is ‘turned into blood’, and its water becomes undrinkable. This is round one of the real battle, between God and a ruthless dictator. Everyone knows the immense influence of the Nile in the economy of Egypt. Pharaoh’s technological command of the great river gives him incalculable power over his population, a power which he is quite willing to use, without hesitation, to suppress dissent. He cannot yield to an alternative authority that controls the Nile without losing his absolute sway over his people. His ‘science advisers’, however, are able to match the poisoning of the river; perhaps, at his behest, they have done it many times. So Pharaoh retires, chastened but by no means subdued, to his palace, to assess the damage to his reputation and self-esteem.

By God’s command the river remains poisoned for seven days. No mere incidental remark this; the original creation took seven days, and the recreation of the good order of the Nile took the same time.

Psalm 34:1-10 (11-22)

This psalm encapsulates a key element in biblical spirituality: peace is found in the right attitude towards God. The word ‘bless’ in verse 1 carries a specific meaning when it is used, as here, of a relationship between a subject and his sovereign. It signifies kneeling before the sovereign in acknowledgement of dependence. Peace is found not in rebellion but in the submission of thankfulness, not of fear (in its modern sense).

Romans 5: 12-21

In my commentary, this passage occupies eleven large-format pages! It is a passage of great significance for Paul himself, struggling as he is to think through and set forth the relationship between his own Jewish tradition and the radically game-changing action of God in Jesus Christ.

The story of Adam's primal defection and its consequences for humanity are contrasted with the story of Jesus' obedience and the blessings it bears for us all. Interestingly, the Adam narrative appears to flow forwards – Adam sinned, therefore humanity is in a kind of universal bondage – but it can be argued the other way round entirely – clearly humanity is in a kind of bondage; this demands an explanation – arguing backwards from the phenomenon to its explanation.

Whichever way we take it, Paul's argument about Adam is both dramatic and bold. The logic of The Fall leads inexorably to a world in which every human enterprise is inescapably fraught with hazard; bad stuff happens, from a burst tyre on a wet night, to a shelf that falls off the wall when we overload it with books. The point is not, however, that bad stuff inevitably happens, but that we cannot escape from the possibility of it happening.

What, then, is he saying about the radical obedience of Jesus? Is it that we cannot now escape the possibility that blessings will come unbidden? That we have to guard with all possible care against blessing, as our forefathers were driven to precaution after precaution?

Luke 22: 1-13

This Sunday and next, Lent 5 (Passion Sunday) and 6 (Palm Sunday), draw together two themes: dazzle and disaster. As our evening Gospel we read Luke's account of the preparation for Passover, the Seder meal. Although in reality the actual event lies eleven or twelve days ahead, its shadow already falls across our path; and its light too.

Its shadow is cast in the form of Judas and what is going on in his life. Many people have pondered the questions that surround this character. Was he becoming impatient with Jesus' apparent reluctance to take decisive action, as some have suggested? Was he just disillusioned and wanting out, but with a better pension?

Many of us will recognise, however, the tensions that pull us this way and that when we have to take decisions. In a recent book (2011) Daniel Kahnemann has written of the two ways in which our brains work. One is broadly rational, the other broadly instinctive. We like to think our decision-making is rational and logical, but our instinctive brain has a part to play also. Sometimes it works for our good, sometimes not. But on the whole we make better decisions when we see and understand both players at work.

And the light? What was on Jesus' mind as he planned so carefully for the Passover meal? Was he giving his disciples – and perhaps himself – an illusion of normality, by going through the motions of an ancient memorial? Or perhaps he was highlighting the content and meaning of that ancient memorial, gently urging his followers to take their thinking in *this* direction when in the days to come they must face up to the fact of his death. Find here, in this ancient and familiar story of redemption, the meaning of the whirlwind of horror that is about to unfold.