

Sundays between 26 June and 2 July, Ordinary 13 Year B

We are now in 'Ordinary Time' again – that time of the Christian Year when (so we might believe) nothing extra-ordinary happens. Is it time for God's summer break? Or ours? In fact it's neither, of course.

Being in Ordinary Time means that we have both Continuous and Related Old Testament readings.

Continuous

2 Sam 1:1, 17-27

Saul has fallen on his sword. David sings a paean of praise to the dead king. But Saul's son Jonathan is also dead, and David and Jonathan were – how shall we put this – close friends. In trying to interpret the relationship between David and Jonathan we must tread very carefully. On the one hand we have the Christian gay community finding in them a model for their own faithful committed relationships. That same gay community warns us against reading the Old Testament (allegedly) anti-gay texts as if their social setting were the same as our own. Yet in reading a gay relationship into that of David and Jonathan may they not be falling into the same trap? The idea of close friendship between males is a long tradition embedded in widely varying social settings.

Here is an example. When visiting an Arab country a few years ago I was startled to find young men (I would guess them to be young teenagers) strolling about holding hands – this in a culture in which homosexuality is punishable by the severest sanctions. It would have been utterly wrong to interpret this behaviour in terms of western gay culture. Not even verse 26 gives us this warrant beyond reasonable doubt, because it is equally hazardous to interpret heterosexual relations in the Bible as if they were exactly like our own.

So, we must accept that we have no basis for regarding the relationship between David and Jonathan as a prototype of today's gay relationships. But nor do we have any basis for denying that possibility. We must accept it for what the text represents it to be, a close bond of trust and faithfulness, from which Jonathan's death left David distraught with grief.

But we must return to the text! Even in his moment of triumph over Saul, David pays tribute to his fallen foe. In the strongest terms he praises Saul's exercise of the kingly office. David's speech is a prototype, if anything, of Winston Churchill's maxim 'magnanimous in victory'.

Psalms 130

This psalm, often read at funeral services, echoes the speech of David for the fallen Saul and Jonathan – not, of course, in its particularity of mourning for lost friends, but in its despair and longing for things to be different. It is a

universal cry from a desperately uncomfortable place. It is entirely typical of the biblical tradition that close to the heart of all such uncomfortable places is a sense of inner moral uncertainty. The world around me has collapsed; could it be my fault? (See verses 2 and 3). The psalmist's confidence, however, rests securely in God who alone is able to restore order, both within and without.

Related

Wisdom of Solomon 1: 13-15; 2:23, 24

God did not make death! Can you run that past me again? God did not make death?

This remarkable book, sadly excluded from most people's bibles, contains some very forthright challenges. This is one such challenge. The idea that God created everything, that God is responsible for everything, gets us into scalding hot water, theologically and philosophically. It implies that God makes all the nasty things as well as all the nice things, which in turn leaves us with a problem fathoming the real nature of God.

The compiler of this collection of sayings (were they all examples of Solomon's *bons mots*? Who can tell!) is bold enough to confront the issue head on. God did not create death. He made his creatures to live.

Fine, but without death the world would soon become impossible to live in, overcrowded and unable to supply the needs of everybody.

These words are full of hope for us humans. We are not simply 'man born to die'. There is meaning behind it all.

Lam 3: 23-33

Another reading suggested for funeral services. In fact the opening verse is one of the Scripture Sentences recited as the coffin enters the church or the crematorium chapel. The writer goes on in the same vein - which is, it has to be said, submissive in tone. At the heart of its meaning, surely, is verse 26: it is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

God is not to be manipulated, still less coerced or bribed, into shaking out the coffers of God's goodwill. So, what's the deal, if all we are to do is wait patiently? This does not suit today's go-getting, make-things-happen ethos.

Is it an either-or? Or is it perhaps a reminder that in today frenetic lifestyles there is a desperate need for quietness, for meditation, not as an artificially contrived skill, but as a core element of our being.

Or Psalm 30

The psalmist often gets 'up close and personal' with God - so much so that it can be a bit embarrassing at times to stand within earshot of the conversation between the psalmist and God. Here is an instance.

At the beginning the psalm is confidence itself (see verse 5a, especially). But then there is a sudden change of mood. It's almost as if the psalmist has begun hopefully, then withdrawn into himself and suddenly, from the very depths of his being, there comes a wail of anger and anguish that is painful for the listener to hear.

The final two verses return to the main theme of exultant confidence. We may wonder what is going on in the heart of the psalmist. More important is the question: do these changes of mood, from confidence to despair to hope, say anything about our own faith.

2 Cor 8: 7-15

As we have seen in recent readings from this letter, Paul's relationship with Corinth has been a little delicate. He needs to correct them to chide them, to encourage them, but he needs to affirm them too.

Here he begins with affirmation. But he does it in a way that leaves him room to point out their possible shortcomings. For all their spectacular spiritual gifts, the meaty question remains: is their love genuine? Does their claim to be filled with the spirit cash out in terms of their love of their fellow-believers, both within their own congregation and scattered across the known Roman world?

The implication of this passage is that perhaps the answer to those questions must be a reluctant 'No!' Paul's argument, therefore is a theologically-grounded one. He could point to the example of Christ 'who became poor ... so that you might become rich'. The Corinthians should follow Jesus' example, and act generously towards needy sisters and brothers, especially those experiencing hardship in Jerusalem. And then Paul hints at his deeper meaning. He suggests that the poor believers in Jerusalem have something to offer in return - but he doesn't actually say what that is. The important point is that the Corinthians' conceit (they 'excel in everything') is not quite as comprehensive as they imagine. They still lack something that is essential to their Christian profession. And - surprise, surprise - that is love: not a sentiment of the heart but a practical turn of mind. Who has needs that we can supply?

Mark 5: 21-43

This reading links two stories. A woman suffering from a haemorrhage is so ashamed of her condition that she to approach Jesus surreptitiously. An official of the synagogue is panic-stricken because his daughter appears to be at the point of death.

The woman's intervention interrupts Jesus journey to Jairus' house (Mark really is a genius at telling a dramatic story). The little girl has died and one of the servants comes with this tragic news.

I find it very hard to get inside Jesus' head at this point. His confidence is astonishing. 'No problem, Jairus. Just hang on in there and take me to your house. Everything will be fine.'

It is interesting that this story (along with others like the story of the Transfiguration, and the Garden of Gethsemane) also presents Peter and James and John as the favoured 'inner circle' of Jesus closest followers. To emphasise this as the evangelists do, serves to reinforce the primacy of these three apostles for the benefit of the later church. These three are the ones Jesus singled from the Twelve.

The raising of Jairus' daughter offers rich pickings to those who are looking for a 'rational' explanation of a healing miracle. But that is not the point. This story is not a set of medical records; it is not being written up for a clinical audit. It is a story about the power of Jesus to rock people back on their heels by the way he refuses to be constrained by conventional assumptions (she's dead, forget it), and by his power over chronic illness, especially chronic illness that renders the sufferer unclean.