

Sundays between 10 and 16 July, Ordinary 15 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 6:1-5, 12b-19

This passage tells of a rather wild street-party in celebration of something-or-other. In fact the something-or-other is a victory over the Philistines – Israel's arch-enemy. (Later in history there will be other arch-enemies, of course, but Philistia will serve for now!)

Having seen off the Philistines, David's next move is to bring back the Ark of the Lord (the box containing the tablets of stone which Moses brought down from the mountain). The Philistines had captured this (1 Sam chapter 5; a good read!) but it did them no good at all. So they returned the Ark (1 Sam 6 and 7) and it was placed in the care of Eleazar, at Kiriath-Jearim – a region about fifteen miles to the west of Jerusalem. The wild street-party might better be described as a triumphal procession bringing the Ark from Kiriath-Jearim to the new Capital City at Jerusalem. David himself led the dancing, to the disgust of his wife Michal (verse 16 and verse 20). Verse 23 suggests that Michal found this behaviour so demeaning that she and David no longer had sexual relations. This might point to the power Michal exercised over the marriage, and it might also offer a solution to the problem of why, later, David was so infatuated with Bathsheba in chapters 11 and 12.

The public celebration included a feast of bread, meat and cakes. It is interesting to note that the raisin-cake featured in the cult of Baal. Was this careless or deliberate on David's part?

Ps 24

This is a song of pilgrimage, charting the first sight of the City-on-a-hill, the climb to its gates and the triumphal entrance. It is a fitting accompaniment to the 2 Sam reading. But the pilgrim must not come carelessly. Solemn and joyful the triumph may be, but it is a serious business, and proper spiritual preparations are required (verses 3-6).

Related

Amos 7:7-15

Amos is a southerner, delivering God's message to the northern kingdom of Israel (hence the reference to Bethel in verse 13). His prophecies against the king of Israel, Jeroboam, do not go down well, and he is advised to emigrate

and ply his prophetic trade in Judah, the southern kingdom. Amos' response is to say 'Don't look at me as if were a professional prophet' (verse 14); 'I'm only doing what I was told to do' (verse 15).

The content of what Amos was directed to say is a clear judgement against the people (and by implication the ruler) of Israel. Here is a plumb-line that tells Amos that the walls are not truly vertical, and they will crumble.

The behaviour of Amaziah is interesting. On the one hand he warns Jeroboam that Amos is speaking out of turn and in strongly negative terms about the king. On the other hand Amaziah seems keen that Amos should not lose his life but should deliver this warning to the people of Judah.

Ps 85: 8-13

This extract from Psalm 85 is its wholly positive conclusion. Earlier the psalmist had voiced distress because of 'God's anger'. Now the prospect is entirely hopeful; everything is fitting into place. Perhaps the most beautiful verses are 10 and 11, about mercy and truth, righteousness and peace. Peacemakers have given us these words: there can be no justice without peace, no peace without justice. These glorious words of Amos seem to suggest that they could be used in the same way.

There can be no mercy without truth, no truth without mercy.

There can be no righteousness without peace, no peace without righteousness.

A good message for us to ponder.

Epistle Eph 1: 3-14

Paul begins his letter to Ephesus with a high-flown statement about God's long-range planning, and his comprehensive generosity. The faithful are chosen, blessed, adopted. Through Christ they are forgiven, and granted a secure destiny (verse 7). Behind these blessings, however, there is a divine purpose: that 'we might live for the praise of his glory'.

Paul's vision of Christian destiny is never cramped, limited, squeezed into a narrow mould. Always Paul astonishes us by the bold extravagance of his vision – see especially verses 10 and 11.

This is what he, Paul, is in fact delivering to the Ephesians as their church-planter and pastor.

Gospel Mark 6: 14-29

Mark tells the story of the death of Jokanan (John the Baptist). The evangelist presents it as an interlude while the disciples of Jesus are carrying on their mission.

Jokanan is incensed at the conduct of Herod Antipas, a puppet prince, not truly a king. Herod has transgressed by marrying his brother's wife Herodias.

(It is hardly surprising that this is not his first infraction; he had already divorced his first wife in order to marry Herodias. That first wife had been the daughter of an immensely powerful king Aretas of Nabatea. So Jokanan wasn't the only man making enemies!

At a party, the daughter of Herodias dances for Herod's guests, and so pleases Herod that in a wild moment he makes a stupid promise. Herodias seizes the moment and demands Jokanan's execution.

This is a turning point in the gospel account of Jesus' life. Although on this occasion Jesus is not himself in the firing line, nevertheless the signals are clear. Herod is not to be trusted. Anyone who confronts him or crosses him is liable to come to a sticky end. Jesus' association with Jokanan will be remembered (see Luke's much briefer reference to Herod in Lk 9: 7-9; the death of Jokanan is evidently now history).

So far Jesus has irritated the Pharisees, though they are not yet resolved to kill him. Now there are signs of hostility from another quarter: the puppet regency of the Herod family; their position as vassals of Rome is not so secure that they can afford to let things slip out of control, an outcome that their inherent instability seems likely to provoke anyway.

Who is under judgement here? Is it Jokanan for his noisy protests? Is it Herod for his lack of moral sense and political wisdom? Who can tell? Certainly it is an unmistakable sign that things are about to get worse.