

Sundays between 17 and 23 July, Ordinary 16 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 4: 1-14a

David's position as king is securely established. Like so many king (not to mention political leaders) before and since, he becomes obsessed with his legacy. Faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is what defines the unity of the nation he has so recently welded together from twelve tribes. What more fitting legacy than to build a magnificent temple to God.

But God is not convinced. After all, God has not been craving such a luxurious resting place (verses 5-7). God has led the people across deserts and pasturelands; what need is there of buildings?

There is here a thread of ancient history. Domestication of animals preceded settled agriculture. Pastoralists nomadic (keepers of cattle and sheep) could claim that theirs was the original pattern for human life; the farm is a disturbing novelty. God's presence is signalled by the Ark of the Covenant, which could travel with them on their seasonal journeys. So God was indeed the God of deserts, and forests, and grasslands. Put God in a box? What nonsense!

But there is more here. David has asked Nathan, the prophet, for his advice. Initially Nathan's advice was essentially, 'fine, go ahead'. But after a dream (verse 4) Nathan's mind is changed (would we ever say anything except 'I've changed my mind?'). God himself confirms this ruling with a startling pronouncement to David. 'I'll make you a resting place' says the Lord – by which he meant: a coffin.

But this is by no means the end of God's favour towards David. God goes on to reaffirm God's promises to the House of David.

Ps 89: 20-37

There is running through the psalter, a sequence of Royal Psalms. This is one of them. Perhaps used at coronations it praises God for God's faithfulness to the greatest of all the kings, and promises God for continuing blessings.

Related

Jer 23: 1-6

There are two significant, coherent passages in the Prophetic literature in which the leadership is imaged in terms of the shepherd. How appropriate this is in the light of the nomadic pastoral history of God's people.

Here, as in Ezekiel chapter 33 and 34, the finger is pointed directly at the rulers of Israel, who have so far neglected their people that they are better described as wolves rather than shepherds. This is an example of a double-metaphor. First the sheep-shepherd metaphor, and then the wolf metaphor is applied to 'shepherds' who drive the flock away and neglect them.

God's remedy is to raise up true shepherds who will be faithful to their charge. In the second paragraph, verses 5 and 6, this logic is applied to the Righteous Branch, a chain of descendants of David who will embody precisely this principle of faithful shepherding.

Ps 23

It is understandable that this psalm should be nominated for a Sunday on which the theme of the Shepherd is so prominent. We read this psalm on the fourth Sunday of Easter in each of the three lectionary years.

As always, however, the mood of a bible passage undergoes subtle changes in the different light of the readings with which it is coupled. The emphasis here, on this particular Sunday, may be upon the shepherd as a model for community leadership, rather than upon the sheep.

Eph 2: 11-22

One of Paul's central concerns is to dissolve the artificial barriers between people. He sees 'the circumcision' as one such barrier – though it is the distinguishing mark of a child of Abraham (of which he himself is one) ever since God directed Abraham to circumcise the males of his family and his staff. (Gen 17: 9-14). So, God-given or not, this distinction is one by which God is not bound in perpetuity. Why? Because Paul sees the work of Jesus as confronting this division of humanity, seeking to create one humanity rather one divided between the circumcised and the uncircumcised.

In the letter to the Romans Paul explains how it can be that this does not amount to a repudiation of Paul's own Jewish ancestry and inheritance. Here he is content simply to proclaim it as God's truth.

Yet it remains the case that Paul has now set out a different position regarding the covenant between man and God.

The Covenant with Abraham related to Abraham and his lineal descendants – his children. The New Covenant relates to the children of God by adoption, through incorporation into Christ in our baptism. In other words it relates to people who, though excluded by birth from Abraham's covenant people, are nevertheless embraced by God's covenant love as God invites all to be members in Christ Jesus.

The focus has shifted, from a covenant to which people are admitted on essentially genetic grounds, to which in which the criterion for admission is simple: faith in Christ. The clear and unmistakable directive of God has indeed been replaced by a new order.

Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

This fragment from Mark's gospel paints a vivid picture of Jesus being chased hither and yon by crowds who are desperate to see him, hear him, perhaps even touch him. He must indeed have been a real celebrity.

The disciples have been on mission, and need time to debrief and reflect. Notice, however, the pressure Jesus and his disciples felt (verse 31), pressure simply to respond to public demand.

Notice too the report that wherever Jesus went the crowds seem to have got there already (verse 33). And all this without mobile phones!

Finally, notice Jesus' impulse towards sympathy and kindness, which cannot be suppressed by pressing demands.