

## **Sundays between 24 and 30 July, Ordinary 17 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 11:1-15**

This episode has had so many echoes in recent times, in many western countries, that its capacity to shock may have been somewhat lessened. A supremely eminent leader, the hero and the darling of his people, is suddenly discovered to be fragile and susceptible to temptation – and worse still, to abuse his position of power and privilege to get what he wants.

David and Uriah are painted in contrasting colours. Uriah is the utterly loyal servant, forgoing even the delights of connubial bliss in order to ensure that he is at his very fittest for the stern trials of a military campaign. David, meanwhile, is plotting how he might get his hands on Uriah's wife while he is away. Furthermore, on discovering the extent of Uriah's probity and loyalty, he decides that to let Uriah come back to rejoin his wife will simply not do; he must be eliminated. David has the means (his royal power) and the motive (his fascination with the gorgeous Bathsheba). In a supreme ironic twist, the secret letter instructing Joab to deal with Uriah is in fact conveyed by Uriah's own faithful hand.

It is indeed a sickening tale of the abuse of power. In the pages of a red-top newspaper it would make our lips curl in disgust. So what exactly is the point of including this tale in Holy Scripture?

One answer might be found in the way David is described before and after this incident. In his younger days 'the Lord was with him'. Afterwards this is not said. David has neglected his relationship with God. And the price being paid is Uriah's life, Bathsheba's honour and David's own reputation.

Ouch!

#### **Ps 14**

'The fool has said in his heart: "There is no God"'. On this account the world is indeed full of fools. Debates on the sides of busses do not illuminate our thinking, they merely proclaim our inability to listen properly to one another.

The substance of the psalm is a lament that 'everyone is against us'. They are *all* ignorant and corrupt.

But God is in the company of the righteous. 'Righteous is an important word in the Jewish tradition, and this is an interesting sentence. On the face of it, it

adds something to our knowledge of 'the righteous', that God is with them. But in fact it amounts to a definition of 'the righteous': they are the people of whom it can truthfully be said that God is with them. Their ways, their life-in-community, their whole being is aligned with God.

Yet even so, there is need for a plea and a prayer that God would intervene and sort things out (verse 7).

### **Related**

#### **2 Kgs 4: 42-44**

This little tale of Elisha the prophet is not often read, but (along with the story of the manna and the quails in Exodus and Numbers) it serves as an antecedent for the gospel story we know as 'the feeding of the five thousand'; John's version of this story is today's Gospel. Jesus is greater than these great prophets.

Notice also the bringing of the first-fruits to the man of God. We have no idea what lay behind this, but its inclusion in the story is clearly significant. When we recognise what is God's due, then God will transform our 'little stock' into abundance.

#### **Ps 145: 10-18**

This psalm expresses thanksgiving for a rich harvest. God's provision for us is, of course, much more than food. As Jesus hinted in response to the temptations in the wilderness, there is more to life than staying alive (though of course there may be circumstances in which that is, temporarily, our top priority). What remains of supreme importance is our listening to God.

#### **Eph 3: 14-21**

This is one of the finest, clearest, and most beautiful passages in all of Paul's writing. It brings to an end the first part of the letter. Chapters 1 to 3 are devoted largely to the exposition of theological principles, while in chapters 4 to 6 Paul sets out the practical implications that should follow from commitment to Christ. Indeed (see the notes on psalm 14 above) Paul might well want to argue that chapters 4-6 are a *practical* definition of what it means to be a believer, whereas chapters 1-3 are a *theological* definition.

It is almost a refrain in Paul's writing that the life under grace is one in which there are no boundaries, no limits. In 1 Cor 13 it is divine love that knows no limits. Here it is the journey of discipleship that knows no limits (verse 20). But Paul is absolutely clear about his presuppositions. His prayer is that the Ephesian Christians should be rooted and grounded in love, through the indwelling Christ.

## **John 6: 1-21**

This is John's account of the feeding of a huge crowd, followed by the story of the stormy voyage across the lake. We read Mark's account of this latter story six weeks ago.

John's account of the picnic in the countryside includes a tale not reported by the other evangelists. A young lad has brought a picnic lunch for himself, and this is the source of the meagre snack which Jesus turns into a feast for thousands. Again the leftovers fill many baskets.

For some reason, this story has attracted more than its fair share of well-meaning attempts to 'explain' it in practical, naturalistic terms. The little boy's naive generosity in offering to share his lunch prompted the more hard-hearted to share theirs, so there was no need for miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fishes; the true miracle lay in the revelation that if we all share everyone can be fed.

I see no need to wrestle with this story as if what were important is to find out how Jesus did it; as if miraculous and natural explanations were somehow irreconcilable. For my own part I would prefer to stand back from such confrontational approaches and be content with the story as we have it. Nailing down a natural explanation leaves us with nothing to learn from. Proclaiming a miracle, too, leaves us nothing to engage with. The 'point' of this story, like a parable, is that it invites us to ponder God's abundant provision for us; Jesus 'made things happen' in a life-changing, indeed a world-changing way.

And as we said above, Jesus is greater than the greatest of the prophets.