

## **Sundays between 31 July and 6 August, Ordinary 18 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 11:26 – 12:13a**

David's wickedness and greed brings its recompense. On hearing of the death of her husband Bathsheba is grief-stricken. When her time of mourning is complete David brings her to his own house and marries her.

But then the prophet Nathan calls on David and tells him a story. His reaction is one of indignation, because he doesn't know a parable when he hears one. In a memorable phrase Nathan cuts the king down to size: *You are the man!* David collapses like a pricked balloon.

What exactly is the core of this tale? It is surely the way Nathan reveals David to himself by using the parable.

#### **Ps 51: 1-12**

It is widely believed that this psalm is the direct product of the intense remorse that King David experienced as a result of his encounter with Nathan. There can be no doubt that profound emotions have been released within the psalmist, though we cannot say with certainty that these are indeed linked with the Bathsheba/Uriah/Nathan story.

This remarkable psalm has found its way into much Christian penitential liturgy, particularly in Lent.

Especially worth noting are verses 4 and 7. As part of a profound personal confession, verse 4 asserts that the psalmist's offence is primarily against God. At first sight this appears to gloss over the offence done to his fellow human-beings. Haven't they too suffered? But if our conduct harms another, it is hard to see how that can be limited just to one person. Their equilibrium is disturbed and, as a consequence of that, others may be hurt too. A chain-reaction of harm and injury has been set in train, and it is beyond our control. The community has been damaged. It is in that sense that God has been offended. It may be that we cannot be held responsible for *initiating* most of the chains of harm in which we are involved, but it is almost beyond our power to call a halt, or even damp down the resulting turbulence.

Verse 7 speaks of God's desire for 'deep truth' within the psalmist. I read this as God's desire for an inner robustness which can indeed damp down the waves of harmfulness that so damage the community. Careful engineering

design can make a building capable of withstanding severe earthquakes. Think of this 'deep truth' as God's design for enabling us to withstand the earthquakes of life.

## **Related**

### **Exod 16:2-4, 9-15**

They're moaning again. The Israelites, that is. Their protests remind me of the saying attributed to pirates under the command (if my memory serves me well) of Captain Henry Morgan: *Them as die'll be the lucky ones*. It would have been better, say the fractious Israelites, had we perished violently in Egypt rather than suffer slow starvation out here in the desert.

The response of God we know well: manna and quails are provided to satisfy their hunger. Although this provision is abundant, they are not to hoard it; each day enough will be provided.

### **Ps 78:23-29**

Here the psalmist is keeping the memory of those troubled times in the desert before the people's eyes. It seems most likely that this psalm had a liturgical use, to remind the people that when in times long past they had experienced hardship, the Lord had provided for them. The beauty of the poetry here shines out, asking to find liturgical use again. And indeed it has! Bread of angels is surely the inspiration behind 'Bread of Heaven'!

### **Epistle Eph 4:1-16**

Paul moves into the second part of his letter to Ephesus, in which the theological exposition of chapters 1 to 3 finds application in everyday life. Paul's message here is a plea for calmness and unity. That tide of turbulence of which we learned from Psalm 51 finds one of its consequences in dissension and disharmony. Paul's response is to urge the believers to *maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*. Notice that the Spirit is the source of peace. If the believers are not at peace with one another, it does not follow that the Spirit of peace is absent or ineffectual; rather, the believers are not responding as they should.

Paul goes on to emphasise the readiness – indeed the eagerness – of God to give gifts to humanity, so that the body of Christ can be built up in that security of relationships and of personhood that will enable the community to act as a damper on strife and a promoter of peace.

### **Gospel John 6: 24-35**

After the miraculous feeding of the crowd, Jesus and disciples retreat to a quiet place so that he can debrief them. But this cannot be a private debriefing session; the crowd follow and join in the questioning. Jesus points out that there may be more than one reason for their insistent curiosity about him. And no wonder, for he has fed them when they were hungry!

Their line of questioning included two elements. First: *What do we have to do?* In a culture where right action matters enormously, this is not altogether surprising. Jesus' response is to head them off in another direction: *the work God wants you to do is to believe.* The second line of questioning is a familiar one: *give us a clue! Give us an unmistakable sign, so that all doubt and uncertainty can be banished from our minds.*

So here is Jesus' opportunity to remind them that there was another thread to the tale of the great picnic: Bread from Heaven, not just Mother's Pride. And (says Jesus) I am that bread from heaven.

Next week we shall find out how they took that idea on board. For some it stuck in the craw; it was too much for them to swallow.