

Sundays between 7 and 13 August, Ordinary 19 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 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

The readings of the previous two weeks have displayed David as a flawed human being. Here a more nuanced picture emerges. Absalom is David's son, a man of great beauty and widely admired, but he always causes his father grief. He has been gathering around him a coterie of 'All Israel' with the intention of ousting King David. (see 2 Sam 15:13).

Nevertheless David insists that his own officers deal gently with Absalom (verse 5). In a rather bizarre riding accident Absalom is caught in a tree while his donkey walks on. Ignoring the King's orders, his soldiers dispatch Absalom. In their report to the king (conveyed by Ahimaaz and a Cushite) they clearly believe they have done the king a great service by disposing of an insurgency. But David is distraught. Now his inclination to ruthlessness has deserted him. He weeps for his son.

To lose a son, even a rebellious one, is a profound tragedy for a man. David is one of us in this. Do we see here a man 'losing the plot', or a man finding himself?

Ps 130

On 24 May 1738 Mr Wesley attended evensong at St Paul's Cathedral, before his appointment with God at 'a house in Aldersgate Street'. The choir sang an anthem in which this psalm was set. In some ways it continues the theme of penitence introduced last week in Psalm 51. But there is here a subtly different quality to the psalmist's sorrow. The sin is no longer simply the psalmist's own. It is clearer here that the whole atmosphere is wrong, the very structures of human life seem bent upon destruction and misery (who could stand?).

Yet of course the song that emerges is one of hope (verse 4); just be patient.

Related

1 Kgs 19: 4-8

After his stunning victory over the priest of Baal, on Mount Carmel, Elijah is forced to flee the furious anger of Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab. His big adrenalin-rush is exhausted, and he is in despair. He's had enough of celebrity and the public eye. If only he could just retire!

But God provides for his needs through what is described as an angelic visitor. God has more for him to do.

Ps 34: 1-8

This is a very personal psalm, but its words cry out to be heard as testimony. Look at verses 4 and 5 in particular; *look on him and be radiant*. The hymn writer Nahum Tate has picked up this psalm in his lovely hymn 'Through all the changing scenes of life' (HP73).

Epistle Eph 4:25 - 5:2

Here Paul points up the destructive, divisive character of human wrongdoing, bitterness, wrath etc. (verse 31). On the contrary God's people are to put away all falsehood, shun evil talk, 'so that your words may give grace to those who hear'.

What does Paul mean by 'do not grieve the Holy Spirit'? This is such a fascinating phrase. First of all there is the strong implication that what believers do can grieve God the Holy Spirit; that what we do can hurt God. Second, the nature of this hurt is to cause God to grieve; not anger, not wrath, here, but grief, sorrow, sadness, pain. Why is such action so hurtful? Answer: because in the Holy Spirit we have received for ourselves the very promise of the Lord himself. So it is a hurt done not from our ignorance, as inheritors (so we are taught) of Adam's sin, but from choice having once tasted the goodness of God.

Gospel John 6: 35, 41-51

This reading begins with the verse that marked the end of last week's Gospel, and goes on to deal with the objections raised by the Jewish authorities in the hearing of the crowd. In this passage we find echoes of a number of episodes in the OT - especially the murmuring of the Children of Israel as they trudge across the desert. On one level the aim of such a reference is to emphasise the parity between Jesus and Moses - indeed the superiority of Jesus. But the depth of challenge, in what Jesus is doing and saying, to everything the Jewish authorities held most dear, is surely unmistakable. The manna from heaven - why, that is me! And we get into the controversy about eating Jesus' flesh which so turned their stomachs and offended their theological principles.

Is there one verse that encapsulates this amazing reading? Well, take your pick. My choice would be verse 51b: the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. A lifetime is too brief for contemplating such a claim.