

## **Sundays between 14 and 20 August, Ordinary 20 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**

#### **1 Kgs 2:10-12; 3:3-14**

We move on to another book, and another era. Still to come: the fracture of the Davidic dynasty and the descent into chaos. Down that road lie exile and oppressive occupation. But first – Solomon!

This reading reads a little like what we have come to call 'spin', and it may well have been just that. Solomon is painted in glowing colours – healthy, wealthy and wise. Indeed he did preside over a period which can now be looked back on as the high point in Israel's prosperity and power.

Many people have noted the significance of the moment when a parent (especially a father) dies, leaving the next generation to assume the mantle of 'head of the family'. These are times of intense activity and intense emotion, of course, but threading through them is often a strand of questioning: what am I expected to do as the inheritor and, to some extent, the guardian of this family's reputation? Am I up to the task?

Here we find Solomon engaged in just such a period of rumination. The way he does it is described in particularly affectionate detail. The picture of Solomon is one of faithfulness to his father's memory and values, loyalty (above all) to Yahweh, and humility. Solomon is conscious of his need for wisdom far beyond the normal endowment of humanity. When God asks what he desires, Solomon's prayer is for wisdom and discernment.

### **Ps 111**

Read between the lines of this psalm; we shall find there a description of God's values.

Let me try to put it another way. In the ancient world there was, it seemed, a plurality of gods. Each nation and ethnic group had one; each tribe had one; some groups (later, and notably, the Greek and the Roman) had more than one, and referred their prayers to one or another according to circumstances, depending on the area of expertise (responsibility?) of the god concerned. So, the answer to the question: 'What is god like?' would depend on which god you had in mind.

For the Jews, however, there is only *one* God – all others are products simply of the human imagination. So the question: 'What is God like?' when asked

about the *one* God, is in fact quite a different sort of question from when it is asked about one of the tribal gods of surrounding cultures. Because God transcends all human activities, ambitions, rivalries, anxieties etc, this question is now about what *is* – about *everything* that is. No longer is it a description of the character of one god among many, to enable us to tell the difference between them, or choose one in preference to another. Read this psalm in that light and we get a different picture altogether.

## **Related**

### **Prov 9: 1-6**

The book of Proverbs is a collection of sayings, mostly around the theme of wisdom. Here we find a pleasing little metaphor of a feast set out for our delighted consumption. All and sundry – the simple as well as the self-styled ‘wise’ are warmly invited in to taste of true wisdom.

### **Ps 34: 9-14**

This reading from Psalm 34 continues where we left off last week. It begins with a phrase that may fall strangely on our ears: fear the Lord. We are not being invited to cower in terror in some dark corner. Rather we are invited to give God due place in our lives and in the life of our community. Verses 11-14 spell out the extremely simple message: if you want to enjoy life, this is the way. This is the way to wholeness, to richness of living – turn from evil and do good.

### **Epistle Eph 5:15-20**

The theme of ‘wisdom’ pervades today’s readings. Solomon prayed for it (thereby demonstrating that he already had it!). Here the writer of Ephesians urges his readers to live as wise people.

What is the writer’s idea of ‘wisdom’? It is, in fact, very similar to the idea of wisdom found in the Psalms and the other so-called ‘Wisdom Literature’ of the Old Testament: a life focussed on relationship with God. Drunkenness clearly interferes with that relationship and so is to be deplored.

Is this a pattern-for-living that should be commended today? What sort of reception might it find?

### **Gospel John 6: 51-58**

It may be rather hard to see how this reading relates to the wisdom theme, but the connection is there nevertheless. This continues the story of John 6, taking as its starting-point the verse (v.51) where last week’s reading ended. This remarkable (not to say outrageous) claim by Jesus triggers a dispute among the scholars in the audience. They cannot for the life of them see how to interpret Jesus’ claim to be ‘the living bread’. In response, Jesus ‘ups the ante’, challenging them with the most literal possible interpretation of what had begun as a claim naturally open to a metaphoric one.

What, then, is the link with wisdom? In another letter of Paul (1 Corinthians) Paul wrote about the Greek cultural obsession with proof, and the Jewish obsession with 'signs'; the content of the gospel, Paul asserted, is 'Christ crucified, the wisdom of God and the power of God'. Here a similar opposition is being set up, between on the one hand a type of wisdom that consists in applying traditional reasoning to a problem, and on the other a type that hears God speaking in the unexpected and the shocking.