

Sundays between 21 and 27 August, Ordinary 21 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 8: (1-6, 10-11) 22-30, 41-43

This passage describes the dedication of the temple that Solomon had been permitted to build. Last week's reading spoke of a key moment in Solomon's life, when he asked God for wisdom and humility.

After the Ark of the Covenant has been installed in the Holy of Holies (the innermost part of the temple precincts), Solomon offers a prayer. Typical of Prayers in the Old Testament, this one holds God accountable for God's promises – this time to David, Solomon's father (verses 25, 26). Solomon goes on to express appropriate modesty about the temple he has built as such great cost, praying that God will hear the prayers of God's people. It is noticeable that this part of the prayer (verses 27-30) summarises what the people ask of God – that God should forgive them.

The final (detached) paragraph, verses 41-43, is a petition on behalf of the foreigner who, on coming to Jerusalem, wishes to offer prayer to God by approaching the temple.

Ps 84

This exquisite psalm has inspired many composers to match its language with appropriate music. The temple embodies the presence of God among God's people. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that incalculable blessings come to those who offer their reverent devotion at this holy place.

Related

Josh 24: 1-2a, 14-18

At the climax of Joshua's leadership, this gathering summarises the goal towards which God has been guiding the people – a purposeful unity of faithfulness to Yahweh. This land of promise is surrounded by other nations and tribes who owe Yahweh no loyalty at all. Yahweh's people are therefore exposed to the temptations of dalliance with these alien cultures.

But were they not also tempted in this way during those years in the wilderness? There was the incident of the golden calf, indicative, perhaps, of acquaintance with other religious traditions. Perhaps so, but the need for solidarity, during the arduous trek, may well have over-ridden the temptation to stray.

The central point of this narrative, however, is a command to choose (verse 15). But read this paragraph with care. Joshua begins by inviting the people to serve the God who has led them from slavery, through the desert, and into the Promised Land. But if they are not happy with that option, they are to make a choice from among the gods of their new neighbours.

Taken simply as a commentary on the circumstances of the time, this statement appears simply to point out that sooner or later they will worship a god of some kind. If they abandon the worship of Yahweh, then they will worship some other god.

But this choice is not confined to the third millennium BCE. It is surely for today also. We all subscribe to ultimate values of some kind, and in our lifestyle we do our best to live by those ultimate values. In the worship of God we find a coherent set of ultimate values. People may decide not to adopt God as the source of their value-system, but they cannot live in a vacuum. Sooner or later they will find themselves led by another value-system. Joshua's message to us and our contemporaries is surely that it is for us to make the choice about which value-system we follow, rather than drifting with whatever tide happens to be running.

Psa 34: 15-22

This extract from Psalm 34 can be read as a reminder of the blessings that God has given to his people, offering the reasons why the right choice is to find in God the source of ultimate value.

Epistle Eph 6:10-20

Paul's letters are full of 'purple passages' like this one. Here he uses the metaphor of military armour, both protective and offensive. The enemy, however, is clearly the array of influences that draw us away from our devotion to Christ. Paul uses typically extravagant metaphysical language about 'The cosmic powers of this present darkness' to describe these influences. His own metaphor of armour provides food for thought and prayer, not only about how to be a Christian, but about the nature of the influences ranged against us.

There is a depressing cascade of articles in newspapers, in which religion is castigated as an evil force in our society. Such articles may tempt us to keep our heads down and our voices silent rather than identifying ourselves publicly as Christians. But look again at those articles and ask: how much of what they say is (sadly) only too true. There are significant and influential bodies of sexist and homophobic opinion within the church. There is some downright obscurantist argumentation, which really turns people off.

The church quite rightly reflects on the extent to which it should be counter-cultural, but often seems to miss the mark by picking on an easy target: we can best differentiate ourselves by continuing to assert this or that bit of traditional Christian teaching – and usually it's a bit of social or ethical

teaching. It is often easy to depict the church as simply being *against* this or that. And in the resulting controversy we can smugly claim to be persecuted because we resist other ways of doing things.

Gospel John 6: 59-69

For the past several weeks we have been studying this chapter which lies at the heart of John's account of Jesus. Here at its end we come to the crunch-time, when many people turn away, finding Jesus' teaching (particularly about himself) unacceptable.

The Christian faith has at its heart a mystery all must confront – Jesus himself. What exactly do we believe about him? Almost anything that is specific is either wrong or misleading, because we all have different ways of expressing what is most precious to us. The problem is to express something which is both non-trivial and yet conveys significant meaning.

Peter's response is to say (on behalf of all of us, perhaps) 'to whom can we go?' And so this morning's lections come full circle, back to the point Joshua was making so forcefully. If not Yahweh, then who? If not Jesus, then who? Be honest with yourselves: what exactly is it that you take with utmost seriousness? What is the star you follow?