

## **Sundays between 4 and 10 September, Ordinary 23 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**

#### **Prov 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23**

The book of Proverbs comes from a long tradition known as 'Wisdom Literature'. Don't look here for profound theology; look instead for practical advice about living well.

This reading consists of three pairs of verses that highlight ethical concerns. Verses 1 and 2 urge that we should value our reputation about our bank balance. Verses 8 and 9 commend generosity over injustice. Verses 22 and 23 warn sternly against robbing the poor.

This warning, of course, is not about avoiding mugging people in the street. None of us would do that. But potentially it's about *everything* we do, including our purchasing choices in everyday shopping. Do we think about the person at the far end of the food supply chain, the farmer in this country or elsewhere? Indeed, do we think about everyone in the supply chain? Do we think about the environmental consequences of transporting food (or clothing) thousands of miles to reach our shops?

We have delegated these decisions to a god called 'the market'. Along with Isaiah, we might ask ourselves whether this god is up to the job; can it be trusted not only with our purse but with our values? Maybe it can, but how do we know?

#### **Ps 125**

The reward for goodness is the Lord's favour (verse 4, by implication). The psalmist is clearly confident in God's protecting providence against the wicked.

But there is an underlying subtlety that is easy to miss. Verse 4 clearly links divine protection with goodness, and truth of heart. Where are 'faith', 'belief', 'trust'? Are they omitted because they are irrelevant, or could it be that the psalmist is talking about precisely those things but in slightly unfamiliar language? As John Wesley wrote: faith is not a train of ideas in the head, but a disposition of the heart. Some suspicion attaches to trains of ideas (beliefs) unless they take root in the heart and lead to action.

### **Related**

#### **Isa 35: 4-7**

Chapter 35 is a glorious song of return from exile. Think of it: a people long in darkness have seen a great light. The darkness is the darkness of a stolen identity, of a lost passport, forcible removal from one's home and homeland. The theme of exile – the alien place – recurs time and again through the bible. Return from exile is depicted in this wonderful chapter as the coming of light to darkness, hearing to the deaf, sight to the blind, strength and vigour to the lame, streams to a dry and barren land. The prophet sends metaphors tumbling across the stage like acrobats. All this to develop the headline theme: say to those of a fearful heart: be strong, do not fear. Compare the words of Jesus in John 14.

### **Ps 146**

As we have often found, the compilers of the lectionary light upon readings that mirror one another wonderfully. Here, in a call to the people to praise God we hear snorts of disdain towards princes (verses 2 & 3). (Read it like this: there is no help in *them*.) Then there is a long series of declarations of the Lord's actions (note: actions, not merely promises) which set out God's values. There is little point in celebrating a God who gives justice, looses the bound, lifts up those who are bowed down, etc. (verses 5-9), if the community does not follow suit in its life and practice.

### **Epistle Jas 2:1-10 (11-13) 14-17**

James was in dispute with Paul over the matter of faith vs. works. Paul wanted to assert that profound and total trust in God was the necessary and sufficient condition for human salvation (*shalom*). To rely on works to achieve salvation was, he said, deeply flawed. James, for his part, was suspicious of an empty faith that had no visible consequences; how were its claims to be tested except by the resulting actions.

Here we have the definitive statement of James' position. What is the point of faith if it does not result in action? Can we indeed claim to be people of faith if our life does not reflect what we claim to believe in. (See above on Psalm 146!)

We may wish to dismiss this as an either-or argument about a both-and issue. The theological answer is of course both-and; the proof of faith is the transformed lifestyle.

### **Gospel Mark 7: 24-37**

Here are two little stories from Mark's account of Jesus' ministry in the north of Palestine. A foreign woman seeks his help for her daughter, and reluctantly (it would seem) Jesus helps her. Jesus' problem is that she is a foreigner, outside the Covenant. Should he help her or not? Her astute wisdom settles his mind, and he heals the little girl.

In the second story a deaf man is healed. Whether his speech impediment is simply the result of lifelong deafness we do not know; but his healing was

instantaneous (verse 35). How does this gospel reading complement the reading from James?

Here is a possible clue? Both stories are about speech. The woman is a fluent and articulate communicator; she knows what needs to be said and (without fear) she says it. She brings her *performance*, her natural, canny argumentative skill. The deaf man is inarticulate; he brings to Jesus no persuasive art, just his need and his trust. Of course, the woman would not have deployed her persuasive skills if she were not ready to trust Jesus.