

Sundays between 2 and 8 October, 27th in Ordinary Time, 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.

OT Continuous

Job 1: 1; 2: 1-10

In recent years we have been accustomed to hearing the United States described, by the spokesmen of radical Islam, as 'The Great Satan'. Those speakers do not mean, by this phrase, quite what we imagine. Their understanding of Satan is as the great buffoon who cannot be taken seriously because he does not understand what to take seriously.

The book of Job is a story wrapped around a theological debate. This is the first part of the story. Satan (more accurately, *the* Satan) is not the source of all evil, the ruler of a demonic domain; rather he is a member of the heavenly council who is given permission to test a theory about a righteous man. This reading tells of the grievous misfortunes that overtake Job.

Our reading begins with the first verse which simply paints a picture of Job as blameless and upright. In chapter 2 we read of Satan's proposal to put Job to the test. In fact this is a second 'hearing' of the heavenly court; at the first God gave Satan permission to test Job, but we hear now that Job still hasn't cracked in the face of the losses, of close relatives and property, that have been inflicted upon him. God now gives permission for Satan to turn to the person of Job; his body is covered with sores. Despite all this, and the verbal onslaught from his wife, he refuses to surrender his personal integrity and faith.

Ps 26

This psalm might have been written by Job himself. It depicts a man who is upright, a paid-up and active member of the community of faith and respected by his fellow-citizens. There is no hint that the psalmist has suffered any great misfortune as yet. But his first word is "vindicate", suggesting that something isn't quite right in his life.

OT Related

Gen 2: 18-24

This is part of the second 'creation story' found in the early chapters of Genesis. As always, it is a mistake to look here for something comparable to the scientific account of creation; its purpose here is quite different, to account for the social structures and differentiations that surround issues of gender. It is a story of origins (hence 'Genesis'). Here the concern is really the social structure we know as marriage.

I don't know what a biblical creationist would make of this story.

While we might disagree, perhaps strongly, with the story's 'take' on gender, it is important to see what the story is driving at. There are differences which need to be respected. Woman was made as a partner for man. In a patriarchal society it would have been inconceivable to promote a story that depicted man as secondary to woman.

Ps 8

This passage is quoted in Hebrews 2:5. It paints a picture of humanity situated somewhere between God and the rest of non-sentient creation. We enjoy particular favours, being made in God's image, but we also bear matching responsibilities.

Almost a century ago the distinguished astronomer Sir Arthur Eddington wrote a popular book *Stars and Atoms* in which he described the emerging picture of what goes on inside a star. The work he described was then at the forefront of scientific research in astrophysics, and reflected the work of Einstein (a close colleague of Eddington) on the relationship between matter and energy. Eddington described man a mid-way between the atom and the star. About 10^{27} atoms make up a human body. About 10^{28} human bodies add up to enough material to make a star. Eddington was himself a Christian; perhaps he had this psalm in mind.

Epistle Hebr 1: 1-4; 2: 5-12

This letter was almost certainly not written by Paul. In Biblical times the attribution of a book to a revered leader was accepted without question as a way of aligning the true writer with the views and reputation of the revered leader.

The target of Hebrews is believed to be a community of Jewish Christians who have come under a variety of influences causing them to doubt and to question their Christian faith, and to revert to the Jewish tradition from which they came.

The tactical style of argument is very strange to us, but the strategy is clear: the writer is setting out to demonstrate that Christ's priesthood is superior to anything to be found in Jewish tradition. The writer quotes Psalm 8 to place Christ as the pioneer of the journey of maturing which is the human condition.

The final scripture quotation is in fact drawn from two OT sources: Psalm 22:22 and Isaiah 8:17-18. So why are these represented as words of Jesus? The answer is found in this picture of Jesus as both the pioneer of human destiny and as 'the exact imprint of God's very being' (Hebrews 1:3). That being the case, the words of God (in Scripture) are also the words of Jesus himself.

Gospel Mark 10: 2-16

If this scenario were to be re-enacted today, the sharp question might well be something like: 'is abortion permissible'. The Pharisees were clearly on the hunt, looking for any and every opportunity to trap Jesus into some form of self-incriminating statement. In the question of divorce they found one. It was in fact a political and social hot-potato anyway; the scandalous behaviour of Herod Antipas saw to that. Maybe this question could be analogous to the

question about the coin used for paying Roman taxes; whichever way Jesus answered could seal his fate, with one or other of the power-brokers in the land.

As on so many social questions throughout history, there were groups that made a particular issue into a touchstone of approvability. In this case the Essenes (a puritanical group devoted to the scrupulous observance of Torah) made this their issue-of-choice. No polygamy, no divorce. Jesus' answer could reveal his sympathies (if any) with this awkward squad.

Polygamy, incidentally, was not understood primarily as licensing male titillation. Another concern is the position of a widow or single woman, particularly one who has no male relatives to provide for her a home and security. Seen in that light, polygamy does have another, less reprehensible, purpose: the protection of otherwise unprotected females.

Although their question is phrased as a genuine one, the Pharisees already know the answer (verse 4). They don't need to be reminded of it. As often happened, Jesus reiterates the standard Torah teaching. God's intention is for marriage to be faithful and life-long; no amount of careful reasoning can get round that one. Indeed, in verses 10 and 11 he goes even further; anyone who does declare his (or her) marriage at an end (the only formality required) in order to marry someone else is an adulterer. I wonder whether this isn't part of Jesus' challenge to a system that relied for human shalom (at least to some extent) on strict adherence to a code of law. Here and in other places Jesus seems to be saying to the gathering of Pharisees around him: If you want to rely on keeping the law for your ultimate well-being, fine; but you are committing yourselves to meticulous and mechanical observance of the letter; I want to offer you the freedom of the Spirit.

Second Service

Josh 3: 7-17

This reading is in two parts. In the first, the Lord promises a victory that will secure for the people the land of Canaan. The second describes the miraculous passage of the waters of the Jordan. See esp. v. 13. The waters did not part until the priests' feet touched the water.

Pss 125 and 126

Ps 125: As the mountains surround Jerusalem, the Lord surrounds his people. Ps 126: When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

Matt 10: 1-22

The call and mission of the twelve. Much of this is clearly addressed to the later church, rather than to the apostles themselves. There is no report of them failing to return to Jesus

The instruction to heal the sick is plain, explicit, and cannot easily be wished away. Interestingly, the apostles are not at this point given authority to teach!

The apostles are bringers of peace, but the peace they offer will not always be accepted. But they are not to carry with them the baggage of rejection. Rather they are to go on, offering the same message to the people in their next port-of-call. Implicitly, it will be for God to decide the consequences for the rejecters – not the apostles themselves.

It was customary for travellers returning to Israel to shake off the dust of pagan lands as they again set foot on their native soil. By implications, Israel is itself here cast in the role of “pagan land”.