

Sundays between 9 and 15 October, 28th 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 23:1-9, 16-17

The inspired librettist for Mendelssohn's 'Elijah' put the words of verse 3 into the prophet's mouth. They are indeed appropriate, because Elijah too felt he was abandoned; for him too God had big questions to answer.

Job's great demand is that God must be made to answer for what God has done (or permitted to be done) to Job. Job does not expect God to 'contend' with him (verse 6) but he is confident that God will at least hear the charges laid at God's door.

Verse 7 implies that Job sees himself as an upright man, with whom God will deal on equal terms before the law. Justice is justice even for God. God cannot suspend the moral law which God established, otherwise God would be playing himself false.

But poor Job! Wherever he turns he comes up against a blank wall (verses 8 and 9), and this is what terrifies him. It is the sense that the rules have indeed been suspended, that anarchy reigns and not even God is accountable for what has happened.

Ps 22:1-15

This psalm plays a significant role in the New Testament. It is the source of many quotations which the NT writers use to shed interpretive light on the baffling, mysterious and bitter events of the Passion. Another great oratorio – *Messiah* – employs this psalm in its libretto.

The analogy between the Psalmist's bafflement and that of Job is striking (see especially verses 2 and 14-15). But the psalmist goes further in reminding God of the blessings God had conferred upon God's people over many centuries (verses 4 and 5), and upon the psalmist himself (verses 9 and 10). God's reputation is at stake here.

OT Related

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Amos is counted among the 'minor prophets' – but what a misleading term that is! These twelve little books are better known collectively as 'The Twelve Prophets'. Certainly some (Zechariah for example) are deeply problematic, their meaning obscure and difficult to unpack, but Amos stands alongside the great prophets – Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah – in terms of both his message and the searing penetration of his language.

This particular passage almost defies summary, so broad and rich are its references and its contemporary applications. Verses 10-12 describe with uncanny precision the craziness of the housing boom of the years before the so-called Credit Crunch. The prudent did indeed keep silent (verse 13), but a few prophetic voices were raised in warning – and largely ignored.

In the centuries when maritime navigation relied on the sextant, the chronometer and the compass, it was necessary from time to time to carry out a procedure known as ‘boxing the compass’. This involved turning the ship successively to head north, south, east and west, and checking the accuracy of the ship’s compass. Why? Because changes in the equipment fitted to the ship, and changes in the magnetization of the hull, could lead to errors in the compass reading.

The solution, according to Amos, is to carry out a similar procedure on the social community of the people of God, and on each individual members of that community. *Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate* (verse 15). Even more concisely: *Seek the Lord and live* (verse 6)

Ps 90:12-17

So teach us to number our days that we may apply ourselves to wisdom (verse 12). We are living longer with each succeeding decade. Nevertheless, illness comes upon us suddenly and – notwithstanding the stunning accomplishments of medicine – its outcome is never certain. We cannot *number our days*. Yet here the psalmist urges us to do precisely that, to count them one at a time, conscious that each day is God’s gift to us, entrusted to us for our delight and our good and for the good of all his people.

The gift of Shabbat/Sabbath was intended to remind us that though most of our waking days are spent in exercising and developing practical gifts in human toil, the mix is incomplete without time for applying ourselves to wisdom.

In the remainder of this extract from Psalm 90 the psalmist unfolds the implications of the opening words. He, like all those who employ this psalm in public worship and private devotion, is to rely upon God for loving-kindness in the morning (verse 14). He/they/we are to pray for gladness as we reflect on times of adversity and pain (verse 15).

The unmistakable theme underlying this is that – come what may – our relationship with God is to be a source of gladness.

Epistle Hebr 4: 12-16

That theme of gladness in the face of adversity is reflected here also. The language of verses 14-16 is that of a trial-by-ordeal, through which the saints come with gritted teeth and faces bloodied, but with consciences clear and reputation unsullied.

Setting this alongside the words of Psalm 90, however, sheds a slightly different light on the matter. Could this be an example of the word of God being active, sharper than a sword?

People who are experiencing difficult times, with the dreadful presence of life-threatening disease ever dogging their footsteps, may find this really hard to accept. For us as for Jesus,

the candle in the wind is our relationship with God. That alone can sustain us through adversities of all kinds.

Gospel Mark 10: 17-31

Sometimes the teaching of Jesus just blows our minds. Here is a man (the gospels are agreed only on this, and perhaps that he was burdened by his wealth) to whom Jesus sets a challenge. Dump your baggage, let go of all the stuff that has, up to now, defined who and what you are. Let your defining characteristic be that you are a single-minded follower of Jesus.

For Mark's account, it is clear that this man did have a problem with his dependence on money - perhaps the toughest addiction to surrender. But, like other forms of dependency, it can be conquered, and its victims will never know freedom until they have vanquished it.

Second Service

Joshua 5:13 – 6:20

Psalms 127

Matt 11:20-30