

Sunday Scribblings No.15 – 4th after Trinity

Lectionary readings¹ for today are;

Psalm 145: 8-15. Zechariah 9: 9-12. Matthew 11:16-19 & 25-30. Romans 7:15-25a

The lectionary does us proud this week with some great readings that require thought. As we start to turn away from The Passion and head towards All Saints Day on 1st November, the countdown to Advent begins.

So it's hardly surprising to read that the thrust of our biblical readings is also starting to change as the life cycle of the Church Calendar makes one more revolution.

Lets start with Psalm 145 - at the difficult end of the stick!

***** Psalm 145: 8-15 *****

'This psalm is known for several distinguishing marks: it is the last acrostic psalm, the last Davidic psalm, the only psalm to be called a praise psalm in the superscription, and the first of the six great praise psalms that conclude the collection.'² With a CV like that you might think that it would be easy to unravel this psalm but no. Well, not for me anyhow.

'While there is no logical flow of argument running from one psalm to another throughout the Psalter, all are agreed that Psalm 1 forms a fitting introduction and that these last six psalms constitute the most appropriate conclusion to the Psalter.'²

According to the Blue Letter Bible³ this psalm was written about 1015 BC by King David in the last few years of his life. If you read it carefully, you can 'feel' his passion and even though much of the ancient Hebrew word significance is lost in translation, we can, with a few pointers, still pick up the significance of David's Godly praise.

But first, take a moment and think about where David stands on the time line of faith. Start at the point when Abraham was chosen by God around 2000 BC, and now place David from where he is writing in approximately 1015 BC.

Consider his words carefully and note how clearly he both sees and understands the message from God. The psalm neatly divides in three; a beginning in v1-7; a middle in v8-15, and an ending in v16-21. The beginning and ending can teach us a thing or two about how to praise God with full on thanks and praise. Notice how the psalm starts in v1 with David referring to himself as the one who is praising God. Not 'we', or 'our people' or anything else. He is talking about his relationship with God and that's important for us to understand even today. We may belong to a church group, or a county, or a nation and lament our failings of sin and hardship; but when the chips are down, it's all about you, and God. No one else.

Arguably, David was the most important Jewish King of all time. But notice how in v1 he says; **"I will exalt you, my God the King;"**

Take note and act accordingly.

Now have a close look at verses 8-15. What do you notice?

Yes, you are correct. The word 'all' appears several times – ten in the NIV (seven in KJV). Why?

Could it possibly be that David understands that everything on earth and in the heavens belongs to God and that he is acknowledging to God how small he is, even though he is a mighty earthly 'king'. In other words, God is all encompassing; God is all.

Christians take note. It's all about God, not you, nor me, nor anyone else for that matter.

There has been a lot written about the acrostic nature of this psalm, and verse 13b in particular. In short it appears that the 14th letter of the acrostic sequence, the letter 'n' or 'nun' in Hebrew⁴ is missing. Some commentators suggest this was done on purpose by the psalmist and formed a part of a complex literary device that has been long forgotten. Others suggest a wayward scribe who felt the need for additional clarity, or piety, inserted this verse at some later date. Either way, if you look at the psalms physical structure, it seems out of place.

Be that as it may, the key question remains; if you are going to write an acrostic psalm and utilize all twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, why would you miss out the 14th? (The Trinitarian Bible Society goes into some depth on this puzzle.⁵)

Whatever the answer, do not let these small points cloud the message of this great psalm which probably accounts for why it appears three times in our Year A lectionary, and once in Years B and C.⁶

***** Zechariah 9: 9-12 *****

Zechariah is eleventh of the 12 Minor Prophets in the OT. His 'book' is thought to have several authors; Chapters 1-8 are attributed to Zechariah himself, with a date of 520 BC or thereabouts; with chapters 9-14 to at least one other writer, possibly two some considerable time later

The first eight chapters refer to his dreams and prophecies that can be dated to between 520-518 BC, and which mostly refer to the Israelites pending freedom and hopeful release from captivity. The remaining chapters are difficult to date, but thought to originate from many years later after their release from Babylon. Today's reading is from the first of these early release days after 70 years of captivity in Babylon.

The Israelites are longing for freedom; for their home country and for a messiah from the line of David to lead them to salvation. But this is not what God had planned for them. As they were released from Babylon, Cyrus the Great captured Babylonia and thereby assumed the role of victor over Judah as the Israelites are co-opted into the new Persian empire. Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

They continue to be ruled by their oppressors for the next 200 years or so until Alexander the Great invaded Persia in 332 BC; and then, yet again, the Jews found themselves with new rulers. This continued until 63 BC when the Romans arrived ... and stayed for the next 376 years.

With that as a backdrop, it's not hard to see why, in v1-8, the prophet is seeking 'Judgment on Israel's enemies' before recounting God's reply in the words of today's reading starting with the words; ⁹ "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Oh for a messianic king that would sort everything out.

Now, do not make the mistake of reverse thinking that the triumphant entry of Christ entering Jerusalem riding on a donkey is being foretold from this passage, uncanny as it is. At this time in history it was common practice for folk to ride donkeys, but there is more to this than meets the eye.

Jeremiah 22:4, which was written before the exile says this; **“⁴ For if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David’s throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people. ⁵ But if you do not obey these commands, declares the Lord, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin.”**

As we know, the Israelites did not obey **“these commands”** and **“this place became a ruin.”**

But now, after 70 years of captivity, the Israelites have learnt a little humility and so the use of a donkey would not only be far more appropriate, but also send the message that the Messiah from God does not come riding in a war chariot and on horses, but in peace on a lowly donkey.

‘The difference between the two shows how great a change took place in the ideals and expectations of the Jews during and after the Exile.’⁷

And that theme continues throughout today’s reading.

Have a read of the last line of verse 10; **“and from the River to the ends of the earth.”**

What do you think that means? That’s this week’s homework.

***** **Matthew 11:16-19 & 25-30** *****

What a timely and thoroughly appropriate passage verses 25-30 are for our current times.

I’m not going to say much about these as I’d like you to read it and pick it apart in your own time.

As you do, concentrate on the **‘little children’** and verse 27, and then contemplate where you are in your life’s journey of faith.

²⁵ **At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to *little children*. ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.**

²⁷ **“All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”**

²⁸ **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”**

So, if you are **“weary and burdened”** during this ‘lock down’, why not take Jesus’ advice?

‘Take his yoke and find rest for your souls’.

***** **Romans 7:15-25a** *****

We head towards the exit with this passage from Paul to the Romans. It's typically Pauline in that it's simple, but complex; obvious, but mysterious; insightful and full of truth.

In this chapter Paul is tackling the difficult subject of the Law. Remember Matthew 5:17; ¹⁷ **‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.’**

Can you imagine how difficult a task that would be for Paul? He was born in Tarsus, Southern Turkey to a Jewish family, and inherited both Jewish and Roman citizenship. His trade was a 'tent maker', and he worked for the Roman occupiers collecting Jewish taxes for Caesar whilst zealously hunting down new Christians in his spare time. With that background you can imagine that Paul had a good grip on the old, traditional Jewish law.

But something truly remarkable happened during his Damascene conversion. Not only did Jesus appear and challenge Paul and convert Paul to Christianity, but Paul's entire thought process and understanding was changed over time so that he could teach and lead the rest of God's **“little children”**, such as you and me.

God gave Paul a huge task. To take The Word to the new world as it was then and teach them about Christian Salvation, rather than OT Jewish version of salvation. No easy task when you were a traditional Jew.

One of his challenges was, and is, to teach and explain how the old law was being fulfilled, rather than abolished, as it was necessary to maintain the validity of the OT whilst ushering in the NT and all its promise. And that's a difficult thing to do. Like the Jews, we have all grown up with the human concept of both sin and being sinners; of fire and brimstone raining down on us from the pulpit as we are drenched in layer upon layer of impossible words and unachievable life styles.

We have the Ten Commandments that are as valid as ever for guidance as to how a good Christian should live their lives. But on their own these will not give you the truly full, open and free life that Jesus is calling you to. To achieve that you need to develop a full and loving relationship with Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

Fortunately for us, our manual (the Bible), has a perfect example for us to study and follow and that person is Mary Magdalene who 'carries both the symbolism and symbolic weight of the Paschal Mystery understood not as an expiation of sin, but as an act of conscious love.'⁸

And that's the challenge of Christianity.

If you still feel you have the weight of Job on your shoulders, take a copy of today's Romans reading with you when you next go on a walk. Find a dead stone to stand on and read Paul's message out loud as if you were Paul preaching to the Romans on the steps of a grand piece of Roman architecture. I bet you will not be able to stop yourself laughing. Good luck!

Amen

To finish, a short prayer.

Lord Jesus, hear my prayer.

Cast your burden upon the Lord;

He will sustain you.

Create in us clean hearts, O God;

Renew a right spirit in us.

Cast us not away from your presence;

Take not your Holy Spirit from us.

Give us the joy of your saving help;

Sustain us with your life giving spirit.

Blessed be the Lord, day by day;

The God of our salvation, who bears our burdens.⁹

Amen

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1. All biblical passages from the NIV.
2. <https://www.bible-studys.org/Bible%20Books/Psalms/Psalm%20145.html>
3. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/parallel/paral18.cfm>
4. https://www.hebrew4christians.com/Grammar/Unit_One/Aleph-Bet/Nun/nun.html
5. <https://www.tbsbibles.org/page/psalm145>
6. <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/citationindex.php>
7. Smith, J. M. P., & Bewer, J. A. (1912). [*A critical and exegetical commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah*](#) (p. 274). New York: C. Scribner's Sons.
8. Cynthia Bourgeault, 2010, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene*. Shambhala Publications Inc. p215.
9. The Archbishops Council. 2002. *New Patterns for Worship*. Church House Publishing. p231