

Sunday Scribblings No.18 – 7th after Trinity

Lectionary readings¹ for today are;

Psalm 119:129-136. 1 Kings 3:5-12. Matthew 13:31-33 & 44-52. Romans 8:26-39

The theme for today's Scribblings is the acquisition of freedom and the search for wisdom.

***** **Psalm 119:129-136** *****

Today we are blessed with another amazing psalm that deserves our time, thought and action.

The psalmist who penned this literary tour de force must have been very skilled as he/she (?) combines individual lament with word forms usually found in hymns, and interlaces these with a writing style more akin to a wisdom poem. As L.C.Allen writes, "Psalm 119 embraces all these genres and is considered to be the most developed instance of an acrostic poem in the OT."²

The psalm consists of 22 strophes (or paragraphs), each consisting of 8 stanzas. (That's 176 in total which makes it the longest psalm in the Psalter).

Each strophe follows a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and each stanza in that strophe starts with the same letter as that designated to the strophe. Today's lectionary reading falls under the 17th letter of the Hebrew Alphabet, 'Pe' (פ). Unfortunately, the beauty of this visual complexity is lost when the psalm is translated into English, and although the message remains largely intact we will never fully understand the hidden Hebrew message of this type of literary construction or its ancient prayer use.

"Psalm 119 luxuriates in the word, the decrees, the ordinances, and the law of God. It is not a psalm of half measures or cool reserve. The psalmist longs for God like a ferociously thirsty dog pants for water -- slobber everywhere, heavy breathing, sucking the bowl dry (verse 131). The psalmist laments other people's sins, and of course also her own (verse 136). Sin is not an occasion for blame or shame or gossip, but for tears. They are (the tears), as the Orthodox Church has long taught, like a second baptism, a cleansing -- there's a reason you feel better after a good cry.

The psalmist asks for God's face to shine on her the way Aaron asks for God's face to shine on those whom he blesses in the famous passage in Numbers 6:22-27. The shining face of God is what calls all things from non-existence to existence, from selfish sin to abundant and self-giving life."³

But sadly, as Jason Byassee writes, "too much of our faith seems dutiful, joyless, desiccated and anaemic. Psalm 119 shows us a faith that is about delight, with blood and water pumping through to overflowing, full of saliva and tears, shining faces and redeemed slaves.

The psalm portion concludes with several mentions of slavery. We know who God is -- the one who sets people free. This is not about long past history - activists have shown that tens of millions of people live in slavery in our world today, bound by an economic system that prizes low prices above all and petty tyrants who physically restrain and economically shackle. It often looks like slaveholders have nothing to fear... if there is no God, that is. God, Robert Jenson says, is whoever raised Israel from Egypt and Jesus from the dead.

You know the presence of this God by broken shackles and rolled away stones. And you know this God's servants by the wrists and ankles formerly rubbed raw suddenly liberated."³

That's what this psalm is calling you to do. Escape with God to freedom.

***** 1 Kings 3: 5-12 *****

When you read this reading, I suggest you start at verse 1, and finish at verse 15 so as to provide some background into which you can fit today's reading and thereby make some sense of it.

Even then, it's a confusing passage.

The chapter is entitled "Solomon asks for wisdom". Which is all very well, but in v1 we are told that he "**made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter.**" You would be forgiven for wondering why did he not wait for the wisdom that arrives in v12? Maybe it was just the exuberance of youth and passion overriding common sense; or maybe he was simply displaying his human failings. (Read I Kings 11:1-8 to see where his liking of women led him); or maybe he was laying the foundations for a successful foreign policy by a king who would become known for his long reign, good judgement and wisdom.

"Though the marriage of Solomon to the Egyptian princess is mentioned no fewer than five times in 1 Kings, the significance of this union is nowhere discussed by the writer. Egyptian records show that rarely were daughters of the king married off to foreigners; thus, in certain circles in Jerusalem, this might have been considered more than just another political marriage, as were Solomon's other unions. This unusual marriage was indicative of Solomon's major role in regional affairs and of diminishing Egyptian fortunes."⁴

By now you are probably wondering, "What's the message?"

This biblical story "is *sui generis* in its wisdom emphasis and deserves to be read on its own terms.

The story is meant to be exemplary rather than literally factual. It tells us about the ideal Solomon, about Solomon as he ought to have been, not necessarily as he was in historical reality. Perhaps the two were not irreconcilably divorced, for elements of the real and the ideal are present in every person."⁵

"It is noteworthy that Solomon's reply anticipates two special things from God: (1) that as God has performed great fidelity with David the father he will now be generous in taking care of Solomon the son; and (2) that since God has appointed Solomon to rule in David's place, God will now give him all that is needed for carrying out this responsibility. Knowing that these gifts will have to come from God, Solomon speaks of himself as only a young lad, unable to "go out or come in.

Meanwhile, Solomon declares that God's people are "difficult," so his plea is for that openness of heart and mind that will identify good and evil when he is obliged as king to adjudicate among them.

Thus the request is not for a miracle, but for that rare gift of relating perceptively to human persons in their strivings, helping them identify the good and evil in every situation and encouraging them always to choose the good."⁶

That sounds incredibly sensible. So where is the catch??

Well, like Solomon, God has chosen you for a specific reason. So be prepared to answer when God says to you; ⁵"**Ask for whatever you want me to give you.**"

This week we have our last lectionary visit to the parables of Jesus as recoded by Matthew. I'd like you to take a few minutes and think about what Jesus is really trying to teach us. In some ways it's obvious, in others not so.

Here are a few clues.... The tiny mustard seed. The wheat and the weeds. Hidden yeast. Finding hidden treasure. The fisherman who nets a large catch

It's all about finding 'stuff' that is hidden, or starts small and grows. Try to understand what Jesus means by the words "**The Kingdom of heaven is like ...**" It must be important as He says it seven times in this chapter.

We should also take this opportunity to consider the final five verses of this chapter (53-58) even though they are outside the lectionary reading, as they are of equal importance to our journey of faith.

Here Jesus highlights one additional aspect of the kingdom of heaven and that is the role of the scribe. He concludes, "⁵² **Therefore every scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old**"

"Scribes are often portrayed in a negative light in this gospel alongside the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Yet, the role of the scribes was extremely important. They had authority over the law. They were trained, in this case, specifically for the kingdom of God. These scribes are leaders who are responsible for mining the wisdom of the law, both the old and the new, and teaching it to the people. In a modern context, the scribes would be those who have been trained in the gospel.

Preachers out of the treasure of his or her knowledge of God's kingdom must share the ancient context of the gospel (the old) and the contemporary application of it today (the new) with God's people. In other words, those who are responsible for the law must make it relevant for God's people today. Once again, Jesus' focus on the crowd does not eclipse the training and preparation he provides for his disciples.

These five parables have taught us more about the kingdom of heaven. Their wide appeal would have helped the crowd to have a better understanding of the kingdom of heaven. We must seek the kingdom of heaven in order to find it and when we find it, we have found a treasure. This treasure will bring joy that empowers us to rise above life's difficult circumstances.

We experience the kingdom of God in community - all are welcome at the table and the more we are taught by the trained scribes, the more we will grow and become witnesses of God's kingdom here on earth."⁷

Now you might think that the bit about the Scribes 'does not apply to me'; or I don't know enough to teach anyone anything; or my mustard tree is too small and fragile to be of any significance. Well, maybe. But remember this; You know more than the person who does not know Christ. You know more than the psalmist who did not have the NT ... and even Solomon had to start somewhere. And remember, you are a member of the royal priesthood so be prepared to teach and share

"⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." (1 Peter 2:9)

We continue from where we left of last week with Paul in full flood expounding on the Spirit.

Quickly re-read the end of last weeks reading; **“²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.”**

Paul continues; **“²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.”**

And there lies the problem. The problem we humans have is not that we are tongue tied, or short of sufficient biblical words or theology in knowing how to ask God for what we think we might want; the problem we have, unlike Solomon, is that we neither know what we want nor what we really need.

Unsurprisingly, God already knows this which may be why **“²⁶...the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.”**

Take a moment and think about what that really means. The Spirit, who is part of the Trinity of God, is already interceding for you, on your behalf and before you ask, as God knows what you need long before you do.

That's truly mind blowing, but might go some way towards explaining why the best prayer experiences often come out of a time of quiet contemplation with God; a time when no words are used; a time when your heart is switched to 'receive' and your mouth is switched to 'off'.

As we come to the end of this Scribbling, I need to paraphrase the remaining verses of this chapter in which Paul is basically repeating and adding meat to the bones of v17; **“¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”**

That said there are two points that I'd like to draw your attention to.

(1) Predestination (v29) is not a word you find used in the bible very often and without careful thought you might take a wrong theological turning. So what does Paul mean? “He is not inviting reflection on the classic problems of determinism and free will, or thinking in terms of a decree which excludes as well as one which includes. His thought is simply that from the perspective of the end, it will be evident that history has been the stage for the unfolding of God's purpose; the purpose of the Creator fulfilling his original intention in creating.”⁷

(2) **“³⁶ As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered”.**

What is Paul's message here? He is quoting from Psalm 44:22 and trying to convey the concept that as Christians we must suffer with Christ if we are to be saved by Christ. You will remember we discussed this concept in a previous Scribbling.

Finally, as Paul wraps up his current arguments, he gives us these two beautiful verses that you may have heard at a funeral. I believe that they not only perfectly encapsulate Paul's teachings, but also provide us with a Spirit led prayer of real hope for the future;

“³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Amen

To finish, a short prayer.

Lord Jesus, hear our prayer.

Give us the wisdom of Solomon to know when to ask.

Give us the blessing of the Spirit who knows what we need.

Give us the knowledge of Paul that we might know the difference.

And as we bounce from pillar to post in the bagatelle of life under lockdown ...

Help us to water the mustard seed of our faith;

Help us to grow despite the weeds that surround us;

Help us to mix the yeast of your love into the messy dough of our lives;

Help us to find your hidden pearls of faith;

Help us to catch baskets of good fish ...

... that we might become true members of your royal priesthood and scribes for Christ.

Lord Jesus, bless each and every one of us;

Bless our friends and families.

Bless our church and our country.

Bless those who cannot intercede for themselves.

Bless us as you might have us be.

Bless us now and always.

In the name of Christ.

Amen

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1. All biblical passages from the NIV.

2. Allen, L. C. (2002). *Psalms 101–150 (Revised)* (Vol. 21, p. 180). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

3. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3358

4. Cogan, M. (2008). *1 Kings: a new translation with introduction and commentary* (Vol. 10, p. 189). New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

5. Ibid. p191

6. DeVries, S. J. (2003). *1 Kings* (2nd ed, Vol. 12, p. 55). Dallas: Word, Inc.

7. Dunn, J. D. G. (1988). *Romans 1–8* (Vol. 38A, p. 486). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.