

Sunday Scribblings No.22 – 11th after Trinity

Lectionary readings¹ for today are;

Psalm 138. Isaiah 51:1-6. Matthew 16:13-20. Romans 12:1-8.

The theme for today's Scribblings is "Who *are* you? Who do *you* say I am?".

***** Psalm 138 *****

Have you ever wondered 'What is a psalm and why are they important?' As you might have guessed, that's not as easy a question to answer but here goes ...

The psalms are all ancient prayers, songs or poems that have been gathered together by the Israelites to form a 'prayer book', the use of which would enable you to enter a 'virtual temple' and thereby to approach the presence of God whether in the physical Temple or not. They are not an express route to God, but rather a path that we can take a lifetime to walk as we ponder and wait for our faith to grow. As such, they provide the perfect spiritual food for any wandering people, or even a group of faithful people in exile or lockdown.

Psalms 138-145 form a group of eight psalms of David, "bringing to its conclusion his share in the Psalter, altogether nearly half the collection."² In fact 73 of the 150 Psalter psalms are connected to David in one way or another and carry the superscription of "*lědāwīd*, (belonging) to David."³

Indeed, "for good measure, the Old Testament preserves other poems of David, and knows him as 'the sweet psalmist of Israel' (2 Sam. 23:1) and an inventor of musical instruments (Amos 6:5). His authorship of the psalms that bear his name has been challenged on various grounds. The commonest critical opinion is that while David may indeed have been a poet, we cannot tell which, if any, of the psalms he wrote."⁴

"But the modern study of the psalms in the Gunkel-Mowinckel tradition has largely bypassed these points of detail by its insistence on seeing the Psalter in a cultic rather than a personal or historical setting. By asking what recurrent situation a given psalm was composed to meet, this school of thought tends to answer with Mowinckel that the psalms entitled *lědāwīd* were composed *for the use of the davidic king*, the '*David*' of the time being, in his capacity as embodiment and representative of Israel, for whom he speaks in most occurrences of the 'I' and 'me' of the Psalter"⁵

As we know, by Jesus' generosity, we are members of the New Israel. These ancient holy documents therefore form part of our faith's original foundation and just as Jesus used to read and quote them, so should we. So as we wander through this Covid-19 crisis wondering when our exile from normality will end, why not seek some refuge in the same ancient and sacred texts that Jesus himself used whilst remembering that the Torah led us to the Messiah; that lament leads to us praise and that faith leads us to hope. And with hope, we can know who we are and where we are going.

"¹I will praise you, Lord, with all my heart;

³ When I called, you answered me; you greatly emboldened me."

Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life.

**You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes;
with your right hand you save me.**

**⁸ The Lord will vindicate me; your love, Lord, endures forever—
do not abandon the works of your hands."**

***** Isaiah 51:1-6 *****

I picked up Klaus Boltzer's Deutero-Isaiah commentary and my heart sank as I read the following opening sentence on Chapter 51; "The commentaries are largely at one in seeing this as a difficult text. There is a whole series of disputed questions."⁶ Here is the problem according to Boltzer;

"Who is speaking?	Yahweh, the Servant or a speaker?
To whom?	To the exiles, the residents or foreigners?
When?	The tense structure of the text is not clear.
What about?	For example, is Yahweh the rock, or is it Abraham?" ⁶

To help us in your deliberations on this psalm let me give you a clue as to a possible and likely solution which is to be found in Deuteronomy 32:4-43. The scene is set for us on Deuteronomy 31.30 where the Song of Moses is introduced; "³⁰**Moses recited the words of this song from beginning to end in the hearing of the whole assembly of Israel.**" As far as I am aware this is the only other time in the OT that God is referred to as a 'rock'.

Now, we know that Isaiah II covers chapters 40-55 and if we look at the headings of these chapters we find the following titles.

- 40 Comfort for God's People
- 41 The Helper of Israel
- 42 The Servant of the Lord · Song of Praise to the Lord · Israel Blind and Deaf
- 43 Israel's Only Savior · God's Mercy and Israel's Unfaithfulness
- 44 Israel the Chosen · The Lord, Not Idols · Jerusalem to Be Inhabited
- 45 "This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to
- 46 Gods of Babylon
- 47 The Fall of Babylon
- 48 Stubborn Israel · Israel Freed
- 49 The Servant of the Lord · Restoration of Israel
- 50 Israel's Sin and the Servant's Obedience
- 51 Everlasting Salvation for Zion · The Cup of the Lord's Wrath
- 52 The Suffering and Glory of the Servant
- 53 Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the
- 54 The Future Glory of Zion
- 55 Invitation to the Thirsty

Can you detect the flavour of Isaiah II? The feeling of angst from a people in captivity?

If you approach today's psalm looking through this lens I'm sure you will work out what's happening. The psalmist is juxtapositioning Abraham and Sarah with God, Zion and Genesis. But why? What is the psalmist trying to achieve?

Remember that the Israelites are in captivity. Could he be trying to help the Israelites regain their purpose and work out "Who are we?" ... and ... "Where is God?"

I've never been one to be overawed by people of status or means. Try and imagine how you might feel if, by chance, you had had the privilege, or pain, of meeting 'a charlatan', 'a property developer turned politician', or possibly an 'orange tweeter'. Then again how about meeting Winston Churchill, Nelson Mandela or Mother Theresa? 'Ah-hah!' I hear you say, 'that's different', and I agree with you, but why?

Now, pick up your staff and put on your disciples 'hat', thawb and abaya before donning your sandals and following your new leader. Why you have left everything behind you to follow this itinerant, obdurate, obstinate, hard to fathom out preacher who is pushing a completely new concept of faith that does not even require a Temple, let alone a sacrifice; and not even an authoritative Pharisee or Sadducee to oversee it.

We know that He is not; ¹⁴**“John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”** John the Baptist!! How could he be? ... after all, not so long ago they were both alive at the same time! And whilst similar to some prophets, this one is 'different'.

Then Jesus says; ¹⁵**“But what about you?” “Who do you say I am?”** Imagine how your blood would be pumping. Your brain racing as it seeks an answer ... your temples seem ready to explode. The silence is deafening with your ears ringing in the noise vacuum. In silence you stand motionless before Jesus desperately hoping that one of the others will speak up.

¹⁶**Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”**

What? What in heavens name is he saying now? Did I hear that correctly?

¹⁷**Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.**

In an instant, the 'one who hears' (Simon) has been renamed Peter (A rock) in recognition of his transition *by God* from 'follower' to a true and trusted Apostle on which Jesus will build His church.

Now go back and re-read that paragraph as it's truly amazing. God has opened both Simon's eyes and his understanding as to exactly who Jesus is, and in recognition of this Jesus changes his name to Peter. This is the pivot point in Jesus' ministry, and arguably the birth of Christianity. The point at which the long march towards Jerusalem begins and from which the salvation of the cross will be born.

Homework Question: Do you think that this is also the point at which Jesus became aware of His destiny, or did He always know of God's plans?

Some people may well experience a Simeon/Simon to Peter/Cephas moment in their lives, but not many, and certainly not often. If that's not you don't worry. Your Christian task is to confess that Jesus is Lord and proclaim the same to others.

And before you answer Jesus' question of “ **Who do you say I am?**” ask yourself, 'Who am I?'

With the start of Chapter 12 Paul launches into the last segment of his letter to the Romans anxious to ensure that the Gentiles will understand his theology and God given insights. It's a tough thing to do especially as he has never met them, whilst at the same time trying to prepare the ground for his planned trip to Rome (to raise funds for an onward journey to Spain).

There is also the problem of the Jewish Christians who has left Rome when Emperor Claudius came to power and started persecuting them, but were now returning following his death in AD54.

“Paul now adds to the doctrinal discussion of God’s uprightness and of the justification and salvation of human beings by grace through faith⁷” by utilizing the concept of humanity being a living sacrifice, rather than a slaughtered animal as a Temple sacrifice. For the early Christians, that would have required an enormous leap of faith and mental agility to enable acceptance.

Notice how Paul starts with the word “Therefore” as if presenting a complex and correct thesis, and immediately follows it with “I urge you” to add power and urgency to his arguments.

“There can be no doubt that Paul is quite capable of taking a strong line and delivering firm instructions when that is called for. But there is no doubt either that he prefers to have people see for themselves what is desirable and do it. It thus seems that something less than a command is what is needed: “beseech” or “urge” is the meaning. The decision is to be that of the Romans; the surrender to God must be completely willing.”⁸

And if you carefully read the words of today's passage you will see that this is exactly the thrust of Paul's message as he changes the interface of Godliness from one of enforced ritual and works to one of self discipline, praise and prayer.

Cleverly, in my view, he introduces the concept of believers themselves being the living sacrifice and thereby Holy to some extent. It follows that if we are Holy and pleasing to God that we would need to be transformed from the “²pattern of this world” so that we no longer conform to idolatry, war, inappropriate sexual practices and the like.

In v3 Paul usefully warns us; “**Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.**” As we said earlier, each of us will have a different faith journey and experience. They are all equally valid in God's eyes. He continues drawing an analogy of our human body with the members of the body of Christ giving the strong message that all our gifts, abilities and Christian achievements are important to God.

As this scribbling comes to an end I'm hoping that you are now well armed to be able to answer Jesus' question;

Question: Who are you?

Question: ¹⁵ “**Who do you say I am?**”

Amen

To finish, a short prayer as we walk in darkness of Covid.

Lord Jesus, hear my prayer.

¹ I will praise you, Lord, with all my heart;
before the “gods” I will sing your praise.

³ When I called, you answered me;
you greatly emboldened me.

.... *keep silence*

⁷ Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve my life.

⁸ The Lord will vindicate me;
your love, Lord, endures forever—

.... *keep silence*

..... do not abandon the works of your hands,
..... do not abandon me.

In the name of Christ.

Amen

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1. All biblical passages from the NIV.

2. Kidner, D. (1975). [Psalms 73–150: An Introduction and Commentary](#) (Vol. 16, p. 497). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

3. Kidner, D. (1973). [Psalms 1–72: an introduction and commentary](#) (Vol. 15, p. 48). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

4. Ibid. p48

5. Ibid. p49

6. Baltzer, K. (2001). [Deutero-Isaiah: a commentary on Isaiah 40–55](#). (P. Machinist, Ed.) (p. 344). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

7. Fitzmyer, J. A., S. J. (2008). [Romans: a new translation with introduction and commentary](#) (Vol. 33, p. 637). New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

8. Morris, L. (1988). [The Epistle to the Romans](#) (p. 432). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; InterVarsity Press.