

Some reflections on the readings for the Third Sunday before Lent

With the Archdeaconry Synod taking place last week, I am afraid I was unable to find time to prepare some reflections on last Sunday's readings. Apologies. Following the festal seasons of Christmas and Easter which concluded with the feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple two Sundays ago, we are now into four Sundays of 'Ordinary Time' before Lent comes round once again. We meet some of the most important themes of the ministry of Jesus during these weeks. This Sunday we consider how people who are unfortunate and marginalised, those who are suffering and persecuted are assured by Jesus: consider yourselves fortunate, for I am with you and will never abandon you! If you are aware of your poverty (in whatever form it takes) and you trust in me, I will carry you. May our readings help us to count ourselves among the poor who rely on him and look forward to the blessings of his kingdom, on earth as in heaven.

Jeremiah 17: 5 – 10

This short passage is part of a miscellaneous collection of wisdom sayings which are also reflected in today's appointed Psalm (Psalm 1). Which of the writings came first is difficult to say. The reading introduces the concept of two ways or paths in life that can be followed. We might say two alternative lifestyles, one leading to life, the other to death. Death here means a sad and unsatisfactory quality of life, like wandering in an endless desert, for which physical death is perhaps the only thing to look forward to for those who choose to follow this way. Through the prophet, God asks his people to choose which way they wish to follow. The right way is God's way, a way that leads to happiness and life.

1 Corinthians 15: 12 – 20

This is the second instalment of Paul's long passage on the resurrection. This chapter is the earliest account and discussion of the resurrection of Christ. The first eleven verses, which we read last Sunday, provided the list of resurrection appearances to the apostles and others, which Paul concludes by mentioning his own experience, not least to confirm his credentials as one of the first apostles, those who have seen the risen Lord.

In the other chapters of this long letter, Paul is addressing questions that the Corinthian Christians have put to him, but here he addresses an issue he has simply heard about rather than one referred to him. This issue was not so much about the resurrection as such but about the nature of the risen body, which was a problem for the Greeks who thought differently from the Jews about the nature of resurrection life.

Paul's central argument is that because Christ has risen, resurrection is possible. If it were impossible, Christ could not have risen. Christian faith and preaching would therefore be futile. The word Paul uses for risen 'body' is about the continuity of human identity and personality but not necessarily of the flesh. 'We shall be changed,' he later says (v. 52). While flesh and blood are necessary for life on earth, in the realm of the Spirit (heaven) different conditions will apply. God would provide a body appropriate for life in that realm, a spiritual body.

It necessarily remains a mystery while we live this life. But Christians can be assured that they already possess the life-giving power of the Spirit, which is the guarantee of a blessed life beyond the grave. Christ's resurrection is the surety and first fruits of all who die in him.

Luke 6: 17 & 20 – 26

Here is Luke's version of Jesus' teaching called the 'Beatitudes' (From 'Blessed are...'). While Matthew (5: 3 – 12) lists nine beatitudes, Luke reduces them to four. They are addressed to the disciples and indicate the blessings which the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus brings to them. They involve a reversal of the existing order, the norms at that time and just about every society in history before and since, and reflect the Magnificat (the song of Mary, Ch. 1: 46 – 55). They are followed by a list of four maledictions or 'woes,' addressed to those who reject the programme of the kingdom, again as reflected in the Magnificat.

Those who are rich are not condemned because of their present comforts but because they have chosen indulgence and have no regard for the poor. They happily feed themselves but are not hungry for God.

So, two ways which are central to Jesus' teaching. The way of the kingdom of God and its blessings centred on faith and love is not possible for those whose lives and attitudes are purely worldly and self-centred. But love of God and neighbour (particularly the neighbour in need and the stranger, the 'other') leads to life as God meant it to be lived.

A Prayer for this Sunday:

God our Father, you appeal to us through Jesus your Son to choose freely and responsibly the kind of happiness that endures. May his gospel shock us into recognizing the emptiness and poverty of material riches and human power alone. We ask you to fill our poverty with the riches and freedom of your truth, your love and justice, which you offer to us through Jesus Christ, your living Word who calls us to follow him along his way. Amen.