

“Words On The Word”

Reading the Readings with Revd Stephen Froggatt

Sunday 28th June 2020

Lectionary Passages for Year A Ordinary 13 (see MWB p585):

Old Testament: Jeremiah 28:5-9

Psalm: Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18

Epistle: Romans 6:12-23

Gospel: Matthew 10:40-42

Ordinary 13 - What Does God Require?

Another splendid diversity of texts this week, all asking that question, What does God require? Jeremiah is prophesying a period of learning-through-suffering - suggesting that God requires this of God's people rather than the easy life; the Psalmist suggests that God requires us to be still and reflect on all that God has done. Pauls asks questions about how God requires us to live our lives, and under what governing principles. Jesus suggests that what God requires is selfless service in hospitality: water to wash one another's feet is one thing; here the task is as simple as giving a glass of cold water to someone just because they represent Christ to us.

Let's look at these passages together.

On the pages that follow, first come the four Bible readings on a single page, then the reflections on the readings, which begin on Page 3. Finally we have the Lectionary readings in full, in larger print.

Jeremiah 28:5-9

Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD; and the prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! May the LORD do so; may the LORD fulfil the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the LORD, and all the exiles. But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet."

Psalms 89:1-4, 15-18

I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens. You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: 'I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations.'" *Selah* Happy are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O LORD, in the light of your countenance; they exult in your name all day long, and extol your righteousness. For you are the glory of their strength; by your favour our horn is exalted. For our shield belongs to the LORD, our king to the Holy One of Israel.

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Romans 6:12-23

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 10:40-42

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

Ordinary 13

Jeremiah 28:5-9

Under The Yoke Of Babylon

It is the summer of 594 BC. Jeremiah has been instructed by God (Chapter 27) to place a yoke around his neck to symbolise the imminent assault by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon and his great empire. Babylon will rule over the people of Judah and oppress them harshly - like animals. If God's people do not submit to the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar then they will suffer God's wrath with "sword, famine and pestilence". Furthermore, says God, if any prophet comes along and says otherwise then they are lying.

Oh cheer up! says Hananiah, taking Jeremiah's yoke and smashing it to pieces as part of his theatrical showmanship. You'll be fine - the vessels will return to the temple and the exiles will be back before you know it. You can almost see Jeremiah's raised eyebrow as he offers a doubtful Amen! Jeremiah, like everyone else, would certainly hope that good news was just around the corner as Hananiah suggested. But Jeremiah knew that such a naive reading of the times was wishful thinking. He knew that God had called him to be 'the prophet of doom' - bow to Nebuchadnezzar or die to the sword, the famine, the pestilence - that was God's message to the people through Jeremiah. Learn to bend your stubborn hearts.

We'll soon see who is right out of the two of us, says Jeremiah to Hananiah. The history books will record it. The history books did indeed record it - Jeremiah's prophecy was the one which came to pass. Hananiah was dead two months later.

BIBLE STUDY - Use your Study Bible to draw a timeline of events before and after Jeremiah. What else was going on in the world at that time?

WORD STUDY - The name "Hananiah" can be translated "The Lord has been gracious". He is never referred to as a 'false prophet'. How is God using Hananiah?

DEVOTIONAL - Hear the word of the Lord! God speaks to us all in different ways through the ages. In what ways does God speak today?

The answer is - nobody really knows. The question - what is the meaning of the word 'selah' in the psalms? There have been many suggestions.

The general consensus suggests not so much what the word means but what it signifies. It is likely that at the utterance of the word, the people's response was to be still and reflect on what has just been said. Perhaps a gong was struck. Perhaps there was a musical interlude. Perhaps there was even a congregational response like a shout of praise. I think a good interpretation for us, especially as we tend to read the psalms for ourselves in silence rather than hear someone read them aloud, is to stop, look around, and reflect on the words we have just read. Read them again. Then again. Once more just to be sure. Be still and listen - perhaps God wants to speak to you through that moment of silence.

In this Psalm there is certainly much that merits our lasting reflection. Singing of God's love forever ("Over the mountains and the sea..."). Proclaiming God's faithfulness from one generation to another. Celebrating God's unbroken covenant with all God's people. Establishing the throne of David which we recognise in Jesus the Messiah. Any of those could lead us into worship.

The next selection of verses appears as the result of such reflection, a spontaneous song of praise to the Holy One of Israel. The slightly unusual phrase about "our horn is exalted" refers to the trumpets raised jubilantly in joyful procession by the people who "know the festal shout", but also the horn denotes beauty, plenty, and power.

We leave out more of Psalm 89 in this lectionary reading than we include: we read 8 verses and 44 verses remain. But this is a powerful psalm which rounds off the Third Book of Psalms: there are five such Books in the Psalter, each ending with a Doxology / Blessing. And all God's people said Amen!

BIBLE STUDY: Read Psalm 89 in full. Note the changes in voice and theme. Where else is 'Selah' used in this psalm?

DEVOTIONAL: Use the verses that precede this 'Selah' (or any of the 70 others) to quieten your mind and usher you into a time of quiet praise and adoration.

The Book of Deuteronomy is so-called because it means “The Second (*Deutero-*) Giving Of The Law (*-nomy*)”. That is significant because this Epistle has underscored the debate between two rather technical terms - Legalism and Antinomianism. Legalism refers to a tendency to *over-*emphasise the importance of the Law; Antinomianism refers to a tendency to *under-*emphasise the importance of the Law. Should you live your life constantly under the weight of the Law (Legalism)? No! Should you sin because you are not under the Law (Antinomianism)? By no means!

It always saddens me to hear that many people define Christianity as “Believe in God and obey the Ten Commandments”. That creed is rooted solely in a theistic Old-Testament legalism which makes no reference to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Churches and homes which prominently display the Ten Commandments on the wall are missing the point. As Christians, a better Rule of Life would be The Beatitudes of Matthew / Luke, or Paul’s famous words to Timothy:

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance:

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. *1 Tim 1:15*

The Christian faith is rooted not in the success or otherwise of keeping the Old Testament Law (of which there were 613 anyway, not ten!), nor in any kind of cosmic score-sheet by which God keeps an account of all our rights (going to church, giving aid to the poor) and wrongs (well, I won’t give you any ideas!) with the hope that we finish in credit when we die.

The Christian faith is rooted in GRACE - by grace you have been saved, through faith (Eph 2:5-8). The score sheet has not just been erased, it has been torn up. What frees us from the power of sin is not the threat of punishment but the transforming power of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Our lives, in response, then point to lives of love, and no rules are broken when we love as Christ loves us.

REFLECTION - Whilst we do not have carte blanche to behave as we wish, claiming the Law doesn’t apply to us (that’s Antinomianism again...), why do we tend to feel far more comfortable regarding obedience to the Law as our chief objective?

Jill Jenkins has written these wonderful lines in an unpublished hymn:

*Shape our lives to hold compassion
For the suffering, shamed and lost,
Seeking Christ in friend and stranger,
Without care for claim or cost.*

Another contemporary hymn writer, Shirley Erena Murray, expanded the thought in her hymn 'Community of Christ', which you can find for yourself in StF No. 681.

The two hymns - and of course many others - frame the idea that in order to bring Christ to others, we must paradoxically seek Christ in them. The Church is the body of Christ, certainly, but if ever the Church thinks they are sole guardians of the Christ then it creates a deadly distinction between 'us' (the Church) and them (those godless outsiders). NO!

Christ is all and in all. If anything, Christ is to be found more in the lost, the broken and the vulnerable; in the rejected, the outcast and the lonely; in the persecuted and the spat upon - than in any collection of self-righteous people who claim to have got it all together. For whenever we divide humanity into 'us' and 'them' we find Christ outside the perimeter.

In this passage, Jesus has sent out the Disciples, now Apostles, to show others the new way of living that is the Kingdom of God, God's realm. This is a message of compassionate welcome and radical hospitality. This passage is for us too - as we welcome the stranger, particularly the oppressed, so we welcome Christ. As we love the stranger, and make them friend, we bring Christ to them.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

How might we transcend orientations that make us participants in oppression? How might we become more sympathetic to and supportive of the efforts of oppressed people to accomplish social reforms—so that even an usher's greeting or a pastoral handshake becomes the beginning of radically changing our worlds to be more in line with God's realm?

Questions by Rev. Dr. Emilie M. Townes, Dean of the Vanderbilt University Divinity School

Readings for Today

Old Testament Reading

Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD; and the prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! May the LORD do so; may the LORD fulfil the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the LORD, and all the exiles. But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet."

Jeremiah 28:5-9 (NRSV)

Psalm

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with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.
I declare that your steadfast love is established forever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.

You said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to my servant David:
‘I will establish your descendants forever,
and build your throne for all generations.’”

Selah

Happy are the people who know the festal shout,
who walk, O LORD, in the light of your countenance;
they exult in your name all day long,
and extol your righteousness.
For you are the glory of their strength;
by your favour our horn is exalted.
For our shield belongs to the LORD,
our king to the Holy One of Israel.

Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18 (NRSV)

Epistle

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6:12-23 (NRSV)

Gospel

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Matthew 10:40-42 (NRSV)