

# 1.

## **St.Lawrence + Bedmond 28.04.19**

Most of you who are regular attenders will be aware that, generally speaking, we don't ourselves choose the readings from the Bible that are to be read aloud in the Service. They are given to us in a Lectionary, a selection of Bible readings set out over a three year period, with three set readings for each Sunday and a separate list for weekday services. There will be usually a reading from what we call the Old Testament; a reading from either the Acts of the Apostles or one of the New Testament letters or circulars; and a reading from one of the four Gospels.

The intention behind them is that over a period of three years anyone who attends a Church of England service every Sunday almost anywhere in the world will hear read out virtually all four Gospels, most of the contents of the New Testament letters and the book of Acts; and a significant amount of the 39 books of the Old Testament. It is also the intention that every Church of England, or 'Anglican', Church worldwide should stick to the set readings in the Lectionary so that any regular member, no matter where he or she might go to Church on a Sunday will hear the whole process uninterrupted by time or distance.

Of course, not every church by any means sticks to the Lectionary. I have been actively involved in at least three different CofE churches which have chosen to follow their own pattern of readings to fit in with whatever themes they have chosen to pursue at any time of year. We have done it ourselves here, recently, for example, when we embarked on a course of sermons on the theme of prayer and we selected readings which fitted in with the particular aspect of prayer we were focussing on that week. Both here and elsewhere I have on a number of occasions been either invited or required to choose readings which best seem to fit whatever theme I might be pursuing.

In general, there is an expectation that whoever is doing the sermon will try to preach on some aspect either of the Gospel reading set for the day or on whatever theme seems to link all the readings together. All too frequently, we cannot for the life of us work out what the compilers actually had in mind as the link between the readings or why they have

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chosen to start a reading in the middle of a sentence or in the middle of a story which they assume will already be familiar to the hearers.

As expected, when I began to set about preparing a sermon for today I began by reading and examining the set Lectionary readings. My heart sank when I saw that the Old Testament reading set for the day was the Exodus story of the killing by drowning of at least 1,000 Egyptian soldiers in the muddy waters of the Reed Sea, all admittedly enemies of the Jewish refugees from an oppressive Egypt, and all drowned either in the name of or actually at the hand of God. There would then be an extract from the gloating Song of Miriam in which she exhorts her hearers to “sing to the Lord, for he has covered himself in glory; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea”. After which we would be expected to rejoice together with the words “This is the Word of the Lord!” And this depiction of death and destruction in the name of or at the hand of the Lord just one week after the killing of hundreds of Sri Lankans and mutilating of hundreds more, and all carried out with the support and blessing of convinced believers who declare it all to done ‘in the name of the Lord!’. Really?

You may imagine my relief when two days when later I received an email from Pam saying that she was about to send the readings out to today’s readers and did I want to use the set Old Testament reading or the alternative offered in the Lectionary, the one we heard earlier from the Book of Revelation!

So why was I so appalled at the thought of developing and publicly proclaiming that famous Exodus story. It is, after all, a very important element in the development of the story of God’s gradual revelation of himself to humanity and our growing understanding of his character and attitude towards mankind. It is of profound significance to our Jewish friends and fellow-believers who have just finished celebrating the Passover, the story of the rescue of the Israelites at a particular moment in their history and the symbolic re-statement of their dedication to the God whom they see as their potential rescuer from persecution and hostility to this very day.

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Why should I be so reticent about celebrating the notion of the victory of Almighty all-Powerful God over his enemies, however powerful they might think themselves to be?

Hundreds of Christians and others butchered in Sri Lanka; Moslems mercilessly slaughtered in Christchurch, New Zealand; people of all faiths and none coldly and calculatedly destroyed in the Twin Towers all those years ago; and every similar atrocity since. They are the reason why. Because they have all been carried out or supported by people who have actually believed that they have been doing this in the name of, for the sake of and as the agents of the one and only God, by whatever name we call him, Allah, Jehovah, God – that same God who is depicted in that Exodus story.

We are asked to envisage a God whose delight it is not to persuade, not to convert and change, not to win over by love, but to destroy by drowning or by whatever means he can call to hand in whatever period of history his cause and name are attacked by enemies. And we are encouraged to sing to that Lord for he has covered himself in glory – horse and rider he has thrown into the sea; false believer and infidel he has destroyed by bullet and bomb; enemy of the faith he has put down by fire and explosion. And we are to respond by saying “this is the Word of the Lord”.

It is because those who have in our own time carried out the same kind of atrocities as, for example, Joshua and his army are said in the book called by his name to have carried out by slaughtering men, women and children ‘in the name of the Lord’ – because they must have gained their motivation and their inspiration from Scriptures believed to be the ‘Word of the Lord’ whether in the Bible, in the Koran, even in the Hindu and Buddhist Scriptures; it is for that reason I am reluctant to be responsible for such a concept of God to find itself being lodged in any mind wishing to dedicate itself to the very God, also in Joshua’s words, whose I am and whom I serve.

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And all this, despite the fact that I do treasure the Bible as the 'Word of the Lord'; the record, under his guidance, of his revelation of himself to us and of humanity's gradual grasping of the essential character and nature of God himself. I love the Old Testament literature, its history, its poetry, its stories however outrageous and brutal, its visions of God, however short of reality they may come.

But the picture so much of it gives us of God as one who destroys those who oppose him or encourages and incites his followers to declare their devotion to him by the merciless and indiscriminate slaughtering of such opponents 'in his name' – that is not the picture of God that I, as a follower of Christ, can for one minute support. It is not the picture I have from the Bible of the God who has revealed himself to us over many centuries of developing thought and understanding, culminating in himself becoming one of us, 'the Word made flesh' as John's Gospel puts it.

That's where you'll find the true nature and character of God, however close other pictures may or may not come to that truth. In Christ himself, 'of one being with the Father', as we shall say shortly.

Read those Gospels, search through them. Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them. You will not find there a God who rejoices in the destruction of his people, even those who ignore or actively oppose him; nor will you find there a God who calls on any of those who would faithfully serve him to do the same.

Not in his Name!

Amen.

**Brian Hibberd**