

REFLECTION ON PSALM 124:8

Our help is in the name of the Lord Who made Heaven and Earth

You probably know that our Bible readings each week are set out in what's called the Lectionary which goes through the Bible in a three year cycle. Each week four readings are set down; one from the OT, a Psalm, a section of the Gospels and another reading from the NT. Ian generally follows the Lectionary readings in his reflections, and when I take services I like to do the same because I like to force myself to take a good hard look at what the readings say, and how they are connected to each other. To help my understanding I do four things with each reading: firstly I paraphrase the passage, putting it in my own words; secondly I try to determine what it means; thirdly I ask myself what it teaches me about God; and fourthly I see what I have learned.

Sometimes the readings are difficult and I'm tempted to go and look for other Bible passages. This was one of those weeks. You can't avoid being challenged by difficult words and troublesome stories by ignoring them. Scripture isn't necessarily easy. For this week's set readings I've had to look to God, and others, for inspiration. From what I've read others have also found it a difficult week, moaning about the readings and asking if anyone has any idea what to say.

I began by citing the psalm – **Our help is in the name of the Lord Who made Heaven and Earth** and in our lectionary the psalm is understood as a response to the old testament reading. So I'm going to begin by looking at the reading from Esther.

The Book of Esther is very peculiar. It's often included in TV quizzes because it is the only book of the bible that does not mention God, not once. That makes it unique

On top of that biblical scholars tell us that it was written many years after the events it seemingly described. Actually, the first words of the book are the same as those in the book of Joshua and that of Ruth – 'Now it came to pass'. This is a common Hebrew form of words similar to our storytelling phrase 'Once upon a time...'.

And this is some story – it has goodies and baddies, a misguided king, a corrupt villain of an adviser, a beautiful orphan Queen, an honourable father figure, and of course all the twists and turns you would expect to read in a folk tale.

The story ends up celebrating the escape from slaughter of the Jewish people across the extensive empire of the Medes and the Persians . And this delivery from death is still celebrated today in the Jewish festival of Purim with rejoicing and giving of gifts and a duty (on the men at least) to drink quite a lot of alcohol. \

In the extract we have just heard, the beautiful Queen Esther pleads with the King and is listened to – the evil villain is found out and put to death.

But it is not actually a very nice story, is it? The good beautiful Queen may have stood up and risked her life to save her people, but then it is not only the villain who is killed, but all his family, and his whole tribe across the whole empire. We are told 75,000 people are killed.\

If you're like me you might be thinking that it doesn't take very much to see awful parallels in our own time where an aggressor nation or an autocratic ruler pursues and kills their opponents, ND followed by payback, which is followed by revenge, which is followed by payback ad infinitum, becoming a never-ending cycle.

However the desire to 'get your own back' is not just found in the extremes of war. It's found in all of humanity, from the children's play-ground to the workplace, to the sports-field and beyond.

If the story-telling of Esther does not lead us to rejoicing over release from our enemies, but instead directly to the problems of the world and human response of revenge and retribution

which very much continues to plague the ways we think and act, the Gospel reading takes us to a different dark place.

Here, Jesus is teaching his disciples. He has just been revealed to Peter and John in the encounter on the mountain top which we call the transfiguration and he is now travelling with his disciples and beginning to explain what is to happen to the son of man.

As we heard last week, in their efforts to understand Jesus way, the disciples are reported to have been arguing amongst themselves as to who was the greatest amongst them. Jesus lifted up a child into his arms and continues to teach them. It is in that context, with children around, that we hear the words of Jesus.

If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

And then the hard stuff continues

If your hand causes you to stumble cut it off

If your foot causes you to stumble cut it off

If your eye causes you to stumble tear it out

Now I want to make it very clear that Jesus is not actually saying you should mutilate yourself. It's a piece of rhetoric. It's a deliberate overstatement to make a point. I think I need to state that because the English language makes the text hard to hear.

Worse still, a small piece of historical translation means that we hear these words as being about judgment and the life to come – 'better to enter life maimed than have two hands and go to hell'

Mark, of all the Gospel writers, is concerned with establishing the Kingdom of God – for Mark, that Kingdom is a very present reality and it is in the person of Jesus that that reality is made known to us. And indeed, through Jesus, that we are all being called to take part in that Kingdom.

So why when we read this story does it seem to be about something else? 'if you don't want to be thrown into hell' do these things.

It's taken me a very long time to cope with these passages of scripture. Part of the problem comes with the translation – the use of an Anglo-Saxon word 'hell' and a mediaeval understanding of the way the world works. And too often the temptation in the Church is to condemn people – to take on ourselves the judgment that is God's alone, and to cast people we find different into 'hell'.

The text actually refers to the Vale of Hinnom, which is a real place – a valley west and south-west of Jerusalem. It was the place where, if you read the prophet Jeremiah, some of the kings of Judah actually made sacrificial burnt offerings of their own children. Perish the thought. This is a place which became a byword as a cursed place of evil and wickedness. It becomes used in the religious teaching of Jesus' day as a way of referring to evil and the consequences of evil.

And we, of course, are not then helped in understanding this by centuries of literature which has shaped our view.

So what is Jesus actually saying?

Again this is rhetoric, it's an exaggerated figure of speech to make a point to the disciples.

And it is being done by Jesus not to make people fearful of a place of wickedness where they could end up, but rather Jesus is saying this to encourage people to follow him in proclaiming the good news.

As the Gospel of John puts it 'to live life in all its fullness',

Mark describes it at the end of today's Gospel as 'to keep salt in ourselves' so that we can be salt for the world.

The job of bringing in the Kingdom is not about making people fearful of the consequences, but about drawing people into relationship with God, as best as they can be and without putting stumbling blocks in the way of them finding their way to God.

It's unsurprising that the final words of these rhetorical passages are:
– and be at peace with one another.

Suddenly the whole exchange becomes revealed, not as some hellish nightmare, but as exaggeration to tell off the disciples for the arguing amongst themselves. Don't you realise that your squabbling is turning people away from the truth you are here to proclaim – be at peace. \

ut being at peace is, of course, no easy matter.

The call we have in the Kingdom of God is to be reconciled with each other, but to forgive one another and also to seek that forgiveness is not at all easy.

In our worship we do this formally in prayers of confession and in declarations of God's forgiveness. But it remains truly a struggle with which we all live.

Let me give you examples: we can't now go shopping without engaging in questions of justice – and certainly the shared heritage of England and Australia asks serious questions for us about the distribution of wealth and the use of resources, the treatment of formerly enslaved peoples or of indigenous communities and our role today in continuing economic in-balance. What T-shirt I buy and where the cotton comes from is as much about water rights and the treatment of working peoples, about climate change and the protection of the planet, and is as much a matter for my confession and for my prayer.

And as we look to the effects of climate change – the impact of rising sea levels particularly on small island nations in the Pacific, and, closer to home, the effects of drought and flooding rains.

But that is the call of justice which is also there in the call of Jesus to live the kingdom – the call which commands us not to put a stumbling block in the way of the little ones.

You are probably now wondering if I can make this any more difficult.

So with all of that in mind I finally want to turn to the reading from James.

Over the past few weeks we have been working our way through the Letter of James in the Lectionary. Today the reading brings that journey through the letter of James to an end.

The letter of James has often been seen as problematic itself. Some have argued that it should not really be in Scripture at all, but I personally have found it to be an extremely practical bit of writing because here it is, describing in its careful way, rules and thoughts for how church should be. It is a genuine letter about church organisation and behaviour, about holding the faith in joy and to the bringing in of the kingdom in all that we do. I would encourage you to read it through again and again.

It has quite a down to earth practical tone and deals with the reality of church life, of deference and squabbling.

As the letter draws to a close it calls its readers to prayer. To laying on of hands and anointing the sick – to praying with and for each other.

Jesus's rhetoric with his disciples in our Gospel reading was reminding them of the call to peace with each other. James echoes this in his injunction to the church – to seek out the good and pray with and for each other in faith and in failing, so that all may come into the fullness of life .\

began with the verse from today's psalm

**Our help is in the name of the Lord
Who made Heaven and Earth**

The psalm takes us back to Esther and to rejoicing at our deliverance in the face of adversity. But unlike the story of Esther we rejoice in the name of Jesus, not at the death of our adversary in some continuing argument of retribution and injustice, but because in our revelation of God in Jesus we see a call to live life for each other, to pray for each other, to hold the good of each other before our own. In doing so we may just begin to truly glimpse the Kingdom of God as it breaks into our world and to understand

What does it tell us about God?

From the Psalm:

If God, who created the vastness of space and the intricacies of this earth, is on your side, you can be rescued from the clutches of your enemies; perhaps it is rather if you align yourself with that God you will be rescued from the clutches of your enemies.

From James:

God listens

God acts on faithful prayer

God forgives

God restores

God rewards

From Mark

Jesus speaking on behalf of God speaks of high standards and values and not condemning others who are doing good because they don't think the same as we do, and especially of not providing roadblocks to those who are seeking God.

Our help is truly in the name of Lord
Who made heaven and earth.