

“Words On The Word”

Reading the Readings with Revd Stephen Froggatt

Sunday 22nd March 2020

Lectionary Passages for Mothering Sunday:

Old Testament: Exodus 2.1-10 *or* 1 Samuel 1.20-28

Psalms: Psalm 34.11-20 *or* Psalm 127.1-4

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 1.3-7 *or* Colossians 3.12-17

Gospel: Luke 2.33-35 *or* John 19.25-27

Lectionary Passages for Year A Lent 4:

Old Testament: 1 Samuel 16.1-13

Psalms: Psalm 23

Epistle: Ephesians 5.8-14

Gospel: John 9.1-41

MOTHERING SUNDAY

Of course, Mothering Sunday is not about mothers at all. It originated with the practice of domestic servants being allowed one Sunday off a year to return home to their ‘mother church’ i.e. the church where they were baptised, typically accompanied by the family members with whom they could not normally worship. Even before that, in the Sixteenth Century, people from all walks of life would make a point of returning to the mother church for the 4th Sunday of Lent, known as “Laetare Sunday”, based on the opening words of Isaiah 66:10 which would be the set Introit for the day.

For many people, Mother’s Day is very hard. People who grieve a deceased parent. People still living with the effects of a traumatic upbringing. Single women who resent being asked by well-meaning older ladies “Isn’t it time you found yourself a nice young man?” Those struggling to conceive, especially when forced to smile at still more well-meaning older ladies who think they are the first person to say “Come on, love, the clock doesn’t stay ticking for ever”. I know that when church folk gather for a wedding, those older ladies like to turn to the single female members of the congregation with a wink to say “Your turn next!” - until those same single women repeat the exact words back to those older women at the next church funeral...

But just writing today about gatherings for weddings and funerals has made me realise that such gatherings are currently becoming a distant memory in the face of the latest COVID-19 guidance. Just this past week I have had to have difficult conversations with couples and families to explain that the original plans simply can’t happen. It’s tough for everyone.

Old Testament

As we open the Scriptures for today, we are presented with a choice of either the story of the distraught but ever-caring mother of Moses (the well-loved “baby in the basket” story) or the poignant story of Hannah the mother of Samuel, whose fervent prayers for a child were answered, although she had to stick to her side of the promise to give the child back to God after it was weaned.

Which would you have chosen today as your Old Testament reading? Why?

Psalm

The Psalms for today are relevant too. Psalm 34 is a Psalm which reflects on the best way to instruct a child, on instilling the idea that the “fear of the Lord” (i.e. “respect”) is the beginning of wisdom. Psalm 127 acknowledges children as a gift from God, with a warning that unless God is acknowledged at the heart of all of life, then life itself is in vain.

Which would you have chosen today as your Psalm reading? Why?

Epistle

There is a choice of Epistle reading for marking Mothering Sunday. Both of them should have vivid highlights in your Bibles! I love the reading from 2 Corinthians - the “consolation passage”. As mentioned above, Mothering Sunday is not easy for so many people. This is a gentle reading to reflect on if the day is difficult. Christ knew what it was like to suffer, and so our consolation from God is abundant through Christ. The beautiful and rightly-loved passage from Colossians 3 (the whole chapter of which is worthy of repeated reading) is a prayer for peace and thankfulness in the heart of the believer. Right now the thoughts of peace and thankfulness might not be uppermost in your mind, but read this passage again and again, asking God to make it real for you today.

Which would you have chosen today as your Epistle reading? Why?

Gospel

The Gospels present our final choice of readings for Mothering Sunday - one from the beginning of Jesus’ life (Luke 2) and one from the end (John 19). In each of them we catch a glimpse of the wonder, thoughtfulness and awe of Mary the mother of Jesus as she witnesses each scene. In the first, Simeon is showing prescient knowledge about the Christ child in his arms - a prophetic insight into the life and ministry of Jesus, as well as a profound anticipation of the “sword” that will pierce Mary’s own heart too. Perhaps part of the understanding of that “sword” comes in the second reading as Mary contemplates Christ on the cross, as her own son intones the words of adoption. It gradually dawns on her, perhaps, that Jesus is even offering her a new son in the beloved disciple since Jesus himself is returning to the Father. The pains of parenthood have never been more real.

Which would you have chosen today as your Gospel reading? Why?

Take a moment now to read again your chosen readings and to reflect on the passages.

LENT 4

1 Samuel 16:1-13 Samuel Anoints David

Why did God's people need a king? Surely they had God as King and did not need a human alternative! Yet the people demanded a king, and Saul was chosen. What could possibly go wrong? Well, Saul went wrong for a start! In this passage, God tells Samuel not to grieve over Saul because he proved unworthy to rule over God's people. Had Saul been chosen simply out of human desire rather than divine appointment?

In this passage we learn about God's vision and priorities being different from our own. It is almost comical to read how the strong and tall sons of Jesse are turned away one by one until the youngest / weakest / least likely is identified and anointed.

How does this passage anticipate the Kingdom priorities of Jesus?

How can we regard people through God's eyes rather than our own?

WORD STUDY: What words in this passage can you identify having strong New Testament connections (e.g. Bethlehem, sacrifice, sheep...) ?

Psalms 23 The Lord Is My Shepherd

"My Shepherd is the Lord!" begins John Goldingay's defiantly different translation of this very familiar psalm. The writing is wrenched from referencing God in the third person (v1-3) to the second person (v4-6), yet the text is so well known that we probably don't hear the crunch of the gears any more. Instead we see beyond one level of language to the pastoral evocation language of the text. Perhaps strains of Beethoven's 6th Symphony fill your ears, or that old Victorian classic "All In The April Evening"? Certainly as Christians we find it hard not to jump forwards to John 10 and Jesus saying "I Am The Good Shepherd".

In the current coronavirus season of lockdowns, isolation, insecurity and anxiety, it is important to read this reflection on the character of the God who cares and offers comfort.

Who is YOUR Shepherd? What do you mean by that?

Why do you think this Psalm is the most popular choice for funerals?

MEMORY VERSE CHALLENGE: If you haven't done so already, choose a translation of this Psalm (either King James or a contemporary one like NIV or NRSV) and learn this psalm off by heart.

Ephesians 5:8-14 Children of Light

The darkness of fear in the land today is tangible. It's not just the scaremongers and the panic-buyers either. Many self-appointed prophets are making some extraordinary claims. "Coronavirus began in China because the Chinese have not accepted Jesus!" - Odd, especially since there are more practising Christians in China than in the UK.

“The Virus is foretold in the Bible!” - ah, yes. It’s always easy to back-read into an obscure text and find “proof” of a prediction - like the many who claim to find meaning in the incoherent ramblings of Nostradamus. Remember that for every “hidden message” people claim to find in the Bible, there is another equally valid “hidden message” in the text of Moby Dick, or David Copperfield or any other statistically long enough piece of text. “God is chastising his children because we have not repented!” - so Jesus’ death and resurrection were for what end, again?

If anything, these are just the knee-jerk responses of people who feel they need to speak without having anything useful to say. People, as Paul would say, living in the dark. We are called to be children of light. Bearers of light. “I will hold the Christ-light for you in the night-time of your fear” we sing more today than ever.

During this period of Lent, we anticipate the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus. What does resurrection look like in a dark and fearful world?

What does it mean to be a child of light as you serve your neighbour?

What does it mean to be a child of light living in isolation?

John 9:1-41 The Man Born Blind

In Jesus’ time (as now? See above!) people thought that disaster was the direct consequence of sin. The logic went like this:

*You are supposed to be a good person
If you are good you will receive God’s blessings
You are suffering at the moment
Therefore you are not receiving God’s blessings
Therefore you are not being a good person
Therefore you must have sinned in some way
Therefore you have offended God
Therefore God has sent this suffering on you.*

This was the sort of logic used by Job’s friends in his legendary suffering. Yet Job didn’t agree with their logic - arguably that’s the whole point of the book, that the logic above is deeply flawed. Yet here we are, centuries later, and still people are trying to hawk the “you must have sinned” theory.

In this extended passage, John uses Jesus’ words to set the piece in the context of moving from blindness (darkness) to sight (light). In v6-7 we have references to (re-)Creation and even Baptism (new birth (John 3)?) The Pharisees struggle to understand the miracle (or ‘sign’ as John calls them) and are still claiming (v34) that the man’s blindness was the direct result of his sin. Jesus meets the man again, and the man can only fall down in worship.

“Amazing Grace!” What does the hymn tell us about blindness and sight?

What can you do to counter the fake news and teaching you see?

How can you lead the spiritually blind to the sight and light of Jesus?