

Reflection_20220116: Epiphany 2.

Readings: Isaiah 62:1-5, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, John 2:1-11 (NRSV versions used).

I am sure that I am not the only person who, when asked to do a reflection, starts to look at the readings for the day with some trepidation. Indeed, I think someone else made a similar comment in the last couple of months. Some passages can make my heart thump or spirit drop: ‘Oh no, that is such a difficult one to handle: how can I find some constructive things to say about that?’ For example, I find readings where God is *portrayed* as threatening to wipe out a disobedient people or destroy with fire someone who is not following Him properly a very intimidating challenge to address. Of course, there is often an option to chicken out and choose to reflect on one of the other readings. I’ve never done that, of course (well hardly ever, well not very often). Seriously though, I do feel it would generally be wrong just to ignore the difficult readings.

So it was with my usual ‘OK, what have I let myself in for this time’ approach that I started about 10 days ago to look at today’s readings. Usually, having read them, one of the first things I do is write a couple of sentences summary of what to me is the key issue, message or solution to a problem offered in each of the readings. This is what I wrote this time.

Isaiah: beautiful future for Jerusalem and Zion, people married to the land. Other peoples will see this and be impressed (and change their own ways?).

1 Corinthians: description of a range of spiritual gifts, with an emphasis that all are to be used in the service of the Lord for the common good.

John’s gospel: the wedding in Cana, Galilee, where Jesus helps the wedding hosts out of an embarrassing situation by providing a prolific amount of excellent quality wine. The start of Jesus ministry?

Wow, did I get lucky this time! All positive and encouraging – can I stop now? This response was further encouraged by the list that David sent to me of the beautiful hymns he proposed for the service. Well, perhaps we should still look a little deeper.

The Isaiah reading begins with God giving a promise that He will ensure Zion is vindicated and Jerusalem saved in a way all the world will see. Geographically speaking, Zion is a hill in the eastern part of Jerusalem, possibly having that name before Jerusalem was even built, but in the Old Testament the name is often used in a more prophetic context, as the home of God (Is 8, Psalm 7), where God is king (Is 24) and where David is installed as king. So I think by referring to both Jerusalem and Zion, Isaiah could be making both a spiritual and physical promise to the people about a wonderful future, recovering from their earlier period of exile. This is not inconsistent with a summary about Zion in Britannica. In the Old Testament the city of Jerusalem is personified as a woman and addressed or spoken of as “the daughter of Zion,” always in a context charged with feeling aroused by either of two ideas that

stand in opposition to each other: the destruction of Jerusalem or its deliverance. After Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC, the Israelites could not forget Zion (Psalm 137), and, in the prophecy after the Babylonian Exile of the Jews, Zion is the scene of Yahweh's messianic salvation. It is to Zion that the exiles will be restored (Jeremiah 3:14), and there they will find Yahweh (Jeremiah 31). Zion came to mean the Jewish homeland, symbolic of Judaism or Jewish national aspirations. Although the name of Zion is rare in the New Testament, it has been frequently used in Christian literature and hymns as a designation for the heavenly city or for the earthly city of Christian faith and fraternity. In this context, then, the exhortation to care, with God's blessing, for the land and its people extends to us as well. Are we responding as well as we can.

For the 1 Corinthians reading, which is Paul's description of the gifts of the spirit, I would like to list Melanie Howard's summary of it. She is Assistant Professor and Programme Director of Biblical and Theological Studies, Fresno Pacific University, California.

- The Spirit generates saving faith in Jesus into every believer;
- Divine unity engenders spiritual diversity within the community;
- Spiritual giftedness is determined and worked by the Spirit;
- Spiritual gifts are not ends in themselves but are for the benefit of the entire community;
- Each and every person in the fellowship of faith is spiritually gifted and thus charismatic.

This last point, everyone having a gift and therefore being charismatic, may challenge some people, but verse 7 does say 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.'

We heard that one of the Spirit's gifts is for healing and there is a relevant background to this. Melanie points out that in Corinth (as well as throughout the Greco-Roman world), gifts for healings were deeply linked with the god (and cult) of Asclepius, a son of Apollo. While there was a significant temple to Asclepius in Corinth, Paul is telling Christians in Corinth that true healing does not occur there but here in the midst of their own community as a result of the Spirit's gifting activity. I have to admit that this gift is one of the challenges to my own faith. I am confident that Christ motivated, spirit-driven actions by church people, including those at St James and St Mungo's, bring comfort and help to many people in our community and much wider around the world. However, healing of the sort carried out by Jesus and the disciples, amazing physical and mental health healing, seems very rare. I am NOT saying it doesn't happen, and I believe there have been examples of such healing

experienced associated with 'our' church, but it does seem a rare occurrence. We should note, though, that in many of the examples we are told about in the Bible, there are two elements to the healing: the action of the Holy Spirit through Jesus or the disciples AND a prior, genuine, faith within the one being healed. Is this what is missing so much now in our society? Perhaps also I should attend our own monthly Healing Services to find out more. (It's on the first Wednesday evening of each month – hint).

So, we have heard about healing of the land involving right behaviour by its people, to the benefit of all; healing and other gifts to all the community enabled by the Holy Spirit, but what about the gospel reading?

I love the way this story is told. All the mother of Jesus says is 'They have no wine'. No nagging, no plea saying Can't you do something about it? Then Jesus surprising initial reply "'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.'" Oh, OK – sorry, says Mary, going away quietly – NOT! She doesn't even argue with Jesus, Come on – I know you can do something - but instead tells the servants to do whatever He says. The result – a prolific supply of high quality wine, much better than that already served. A miracle – as described, yes BUT the word in John's gospel used to describe the nature of what Jesus does is not miracle but sign. At this point it's worth recalling that wine in the bible is frequently used as a symbol of the joy and celebration associated with salvation (semeion in Greek). Amos 9:13 speaks of the day when "the mountains shall drip sweet wine. and all the hills shall flow with it," for example. Isaiah 25 mentions the feast that God will prepare for **all peoples**, "a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines ... of well-aged wines strained clear". The abundance of fine wine is a symbol of the abundance of joy that awaits not only Israel, but **all peoples** on the day of God's salvation.

From another commentary, this time by Elizabeth Johnson, and with a bit of paraphrasing ...

Abundant life is more than mere existence or survival, and certainly more than an abundance of material things. Abundant life is to know and be known by the One through whom all life came into being (John 1:3; see also John 17:3). It is to have an intimate relationship with the One who loves us so much that he doesn't know how to stop giving. It is the kind of life depicted by the abundance of fine wine in this story.

She also points out that abundant life does not mean a life of ease, comfort, and luxury or an absence of sorrow and suffering. But it does mean that in Jesus we have an abundant, extravagant source of grace to sustain us. Abundant life means that in Christ we are joined to the source of true life, life that is rich and full and eternal, life that ultimately neither sorrow, nor suffering, nor death itself can destroy.

Through this association with a village wedding celebration to which everyone is invited and at which the guests are surprised by the abundance and quality of the wine, this first of Jesus' signs in John's Gospel shows us that the true bridegroom has arrived, and he truly is the life of the party!

To what extent can we put all this together? My feeling is 'very much indeed'. Each of the readings contains a very promising message or sign for the future. Also, interestingly (but surely we shouldn't be surprised) each requires appropriate responses from people, from US, to enable the good things to happen. Care for the land. Believe in and use the gifts we have been given. Obey Jesus commands as the servants did, even if you do not fully understand what you are doing! I think that is a good point on which to finish. Obey Jesus commands, even if you do not fully understand what you are doing!