

27 September Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Esther 7 and 9; Psalm 124; James 5: 13-20; Mark 9:38-50

[Proper 21B/Ordinary 26B/Pentecost 18 September 27, 2015](#) Textweek

As we look at the readings today it is easy to appreciate that to have any understanding we have to go beyond that face value of the text; we need to look at the readings with a critical and discerning eye rather than the blurred vision that comes from the blinkers of church doctrine and dogma.

Our reading and listening to the Scriptures can be a disengaging experience; we hear a noise that we don't really understand and so we switch off; but if we approach in a more questioning and critical manner then we ourselves become open to a questioning and critical encounter both with god and with ourselves.

That said, when we look at the first reading we find it has very little relevance to us; and that is good to know for then we can look at it without any expectation.

The book is a small novel set in Persia during the Jewish Exile, probably between 486-464 BC but written later; it is short and so worth a read through to get the whole story

It is an unusual book of the Bible as it never explicitly mentions God. It tells a story about the escape of Jews from annihilation in Persia, and so is a novel that parallels the theme of Exodus.. The story is set in the royal court of Ahasuerus, and the plot describes how Esther, his Jewish queen, risks her status (and perhaps her life) to reverse a royal edict that had been cunningly arranged via the prime minister. At the end of the story we are then given its purpose, the story explains the origin of the Jewish festival of Purim; and so it is of little relevance to us today.

What is valuable however, is that with a questioning mind we might be led to consider how relevant the broader worldview and practices of the Hebrew traditions are to our spiritual evolution; we might in fact be tempted into landscape of heresy.

It is a worthwhile reflection; we no longer maintain the Hebrew medical traditions of 100 BC, nor do we keep to the societal norms or structures of government from 2115 years ago; so why are we taking time on a Sunday morning to listen to a story, actually only part of a story that describes the creation of a bygone feast day that we no longer celebrate?

And it is that sort of questioning that is helpful for us in getting some real perspective on what we are doing; here we are seeking to realise our becoming as the mystical 'Body of Christ' and we take time to read a novel from Persia that describes a feast day from a past tradition, why?

We don't have to arrive at an answer right away, but there is value for us in taking time to experience and reflect on the question.

Now with that same 'questioning' approach let's look at the New Testament and Gospel readings.

In the second reading, James gives us a lesson on 'prayer'; "*The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.*"

Is it? Do we know, believe and experience what James professes about prayer?

Can we mirror Elijah in our prayer life?

"17 Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest."

Those who 'believe' that we can change the world with prayer will also find plenty of rationalised explanations as to why such prayer so often fails, such explanations usually ending with a conclusion that refers to 'God's will'.

This reading from James really does create questions in relation to 'prayer'; but we might also appreciate that James only addresses a part of the mystery of prayer and if taken as the whole story of 'prayer' then it leads us into a practice of prayer that parallels the tradition of 'letters to Santa'.

But, James still leaves us with an echoing truth that holds open the whole question of prayer; "*The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.*"

In the gospel there is another piece of the prayer jig-saw; and it too causes us to question some of the basic and foundational understandings of our tradition.

"John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." 39 But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 Whoever is not against us is for us."

John and The disciples are quite pleased with themselves for preserving the purity and orthodoxy of the Jesus' movement, by stopping the healing ministry of an outsider.; however they are rebuked for their narrowmindedness and limited understanding of Jesus' healing mission.

So when we hear James say *"The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective"*, we should understand that *"the righteous"* is not necessarily referring to those within the tradition and those keeping the tradition.

And that leads us to another comparison between James and the gospel; in James it is prayer that is seen as the response to suffering, sickness, raising up and forgiveness of sins.

However the gospel has a quite different teaching;

"43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off"

"45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off"

"47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out"

What we do, that which our hand causes; and where we go, that which our foot causes, and what we see, our worldview, that which our eye causes these are all shaped by our actions.

Christ reveals a new paradigm to that of the orthodox Jewish tradition, and even for the disciples, for John and the disciples and for James, it proves hard to grasp; it is a movement beyond 'worship' of God, to embodiment of God.

That new understanding has been appreciated by many over time but has yet to find itself realised in the mainstream Christian 'tradition', it is an understanding reflected in the three quotes we have included in the service sheet;

Mahatma Gandhi

Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one's weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart.

Saint Teresa of Avila

Prayer is an act of love; words are not needed. Even if sickness distracts from thoughts, all that is needed is the will to love.

Saint Therese of Lisieux,

For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned towards heaven; it is a cry of recognition and love.

To underline 'prayer' as an embodiment, the metaphor of 'salt' is used in the gospel:

"49 "For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.""

In addition to the parallel with the fire, or spirit' of Pentecost, the metaphor of "salt" gives us three further understandings:

Firstly, it means *purified*, for it is good, and refined in the fire; so our prayer life is a life of inner purification and refining.

Secondly, "salt" is a seasoning agent; our prayer life gives us a taste for life and enables us to season the lives of others; it leads us into being the *salt of the earth*,.

And finally "salt" has a distinctive character: this speaks of our individually, but also underlines that individuality in harmony with the community.

The Gospel, and the questions we encounter in reading the scriptures, call us to look at our own Saltiness, for we do, each and all, season life itself. And perhaps we need to identify our own beliefs and doubts if we are seeking to add flavour to life and to creation.

Be mindful in the week ahead, take time to pray and seek in that time to discover

a longing of the soul
an act of love
and
a surge of the heart.