

Reflections on Biblical Texts for Sundays Before and After the Day of Private Reflection 21 June 2007

The following reflections are based on the Bible readings in the liturgical calendar for the Sundays before and after the Day of Private Reflection. These can be used privately by individuals or groups, or provide thoughts and insights for sermon/homily material in public worship.

They are offered as windows on reflection and the Bible texts are read from the perspective of the Day's purpose.

Reflection on Bible Readings Sunday 17 June 2007

A Day of Private Reflection offers individuals and small groups the opportunity to reflect a journey through conflict and suffering over three decades. Individuals have been deeply affected and communities have also suffered. The trauma and the suffering have left a continuing legacy. Through reflection we can strengthen our commitment to ensuring that never again will violence be used to achieve or defend political objectives or become our method of dealing with socio-political and cultural differences. Through reflection also we can build new relationships and a new and shared future. Without reflection on our suffering or remembering our past, we or a future generation may experience conflict and violence yet again.

1 Stealing a Wee Man's Vineyard – 1 Kings 21 v 1-10, 15-21

Naboth was a victim, though not altogether an innocent one. His character traits are not particularly attractive; stubborn, bloody-minded and no second thoughts about cursing God and the king. At the same time why should he sell off his inheritance to a powerful and greedy king? He had invested much in his vineyard. But the king wants his land and more than Naboth's land as well. Reasons are invented to justify the elimination of Naboth and with ruthless speed his life is ended. Killed for a cause which his killers have rationalised, or the innocent victim of those who have decided they have power over him? There is no justice in the story and where social justice is forgotten, there is violence and innocent victims. The books of Kings are written from the critical perspective of Israel's prophetic tradition. *'But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness (right relations) like an ever-flowing stream'* (Amos 5 v 24). Social justice is at the heart of God's vision of healthy community. Reflection does well to focus on justice.

2 Listen to the Sound of My Cry – Psalm 5

The Psalms of Israel give voice to every human emotion and feeling. This explains their popularity across the centuries for people struggling with life and faith. Central to the Jewish experience of faith is the continuous argument with God, and both Jesus and Paul were in this tradition. It is why contemporary worship, prayer and reflection need to recover the use of the Psalms. This particular poet (Psalm 5) has been the victim of violence, deceit and lies. Perhaps it was more verbal violence than physical, character assassination, deliberate misrepresentation, maybe even intentional, the destruction of a reputation, innuendo (v 9). It happened too often during our conflict and no group monopolised the offence. Wounded to the heart, how many cried to the Lord, or sometimes cried out to the silence?

The cry itself is an act of faith and God hears the cries of the suffering. That can be easier said than experientially believed. Sometimes it seems that we can only *'watch'* (v 3), hang in there and continue to cry to the silence. But in the community of faith there is the possibility that we experience *'the abundance of your steadfast love'* (v 7). The suffering and vulnerable love of God is unfailing and never lets us go.

3 Don't Talk to Me About Forgiveness! – Luke 7 v 3b – 8 v 3

All of us struggle with forgiveness. It is perhaps the most controversial and emotive word in Christian vocabulary. We hardly know what it means and sometimes do not want to know. Not surprisingly stories in the Gospels about forgiveness are in the context of conflict and dispute. Maybe forgiveness has always been a problem. Today's Gospel has a story which is one of a cluster of stories in Luke-Acts featuring the destitute, sometimes called the sinners. The latter are those who are written off by the religious establishment and its rigid purity laws. Sinners are not necessarily immoral in the Gospels, but they do not or cannot keep the religious rituals. They do not practice the faith. Apart from Jesus there are two characters in Luke's story. Simon is a good person but the trouble is when he looks at the women at the dinner party, he knows he is good. He knew she was a *'sinner'* and even thought that in some way she had defiled Jesus. Furthermore she had gate-crashed the party. Worse, she had spent too much time kissing Jesus' feet! Simon, the pure and the good had a nasty sexual thought about this woman. The woman on the other hand has no name and perhaps Simon had the problem with sex and not her. Whatever this woman's past was, and Simon was a misogynist to think it was sexual, Jesus accepted the love she had shown at the party as a sign that she had been forgiven, released, liberated from her past. Simon with all his religion, as dinner party host, had not washed Jesus' feet, as the practice of Eastern hospitality required. But Simon was also trapped in an honour/shame culture which left no room for compassion.

It maybe that we religious people have the greatest difficulties with forgiveness, ironically because of our religion. Forgiveness is release from the past, for ourselves and others. Difficult as it is, there may be no future without forgiveness. Painful as it will be, we may need to reflect in new ways on forgiveness and its dynamic in dealing with the past and building the future.

Reflection on Bible Readings

Sunday 24 June 2007

Private reflection does not end with a specific day. Reflection needs to be an ongoing part of life's journey. As human beings we have the capacity to remember, and if we ever lose memory we are in a serious condition. It is in remembering that we process the past, personal and communal. Healing, release and new beginnings come through remembering, and reflection is integral to that. Out of such reflection we can begin to build a different present and future. We remember the past and the future. We reflect in hope and allow our future to shape the present.

1 In the Depths of Despair – I Kings 19 v 1-4, 8-15

Many of us cannot begin to imagine the psychological and emotional suffering of those physically scarred or the families of those who lost loved ones during the violent conflict. For many life will never be the same again. Not only are physical scars carried for life but so too are the psychological and emotional scars. There are so many who frequently find themselves in the depths of despair or at the end of their tether. For some it has been, tragically for them and their families, too much, and life has been ended.

Elijah had just slaughtered 450 prophets of Baal. The great contest was no contest. Elijah the man of violence was a hero. After that he descended into the depths of despair and became utterly depressed. It can't be easy killing others, even in God's name! He had King Ahab and Queen Jezebel to worry about and *'fled for his life'* (v 3). Holed up in a cave out in the desert he had a shattering but transformative experience.

One does not kill others without a devastating psychological effect, unless one is a psychopath, and most who killed in our violence were not. In the depths of his despair, much of it perhaps guilt induced, Elijah had an experience of God, a God very different from the god which he believed told him to kill all those prophets. God was not storm force, splitting mountains and breaking rocks. Nor was God earthquake and fire, violent and destructive. God was in *'a sound of sheer silence'* (v 12).

'Be still, and know that I am God!' (Psalm 46 v 10). Or *'be still'* can be translated as *'stop fighting and know that I am God'*. There is no future in violence and killing. It has no moral past either. Elijah discovered that God was non-violent and that the god who justifies, legitimises or authorises our violence, god on our side, is a dangerous and distorted invention of our imagination. We do well to reflect critically on our violence and our violent god images.

2 Hope in God – Psalms 42 and 43

To experience over three decades of violence and civil conflict does not leave us without questions. Unless we have been numbed by the trauma and experience, or we have tried to escape into the delusory world of alcohol, drugs, consumerism or narrow religious certainties, we have faced ultimate questions about life, community and God. Reflection on the past is inevitable and it raises big questions. Where was God in the violence? Where was God in the suffering? What happened to the traditional view of a God who was in charge of all things, protected us from harm and intervened to stop or change things?

God was not on our side, nor it seemed on anybody's side. There were no chosen people and all blood and tears were the same. The god of the good old days when we all *'lived in peace'* is no longer around. For many there is a crisis of faith now. For many the god of our fathers and mothers is no longer believable.

Israel's poets were familiar with this. After all their story was one of oppression by one superpower after another, from Egypt during the time of Moses, to the Romans during the time of Jesus. The Babylonian exile in 587 BCE was the mother of all crises. Community, god images and faith all collapsed and Psalms 42 and 43 reflect this trauma and crisis. *'Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?'* (42 v 11a, 43 v 5a). *'Where is your God?'* (42 v 3b). That too was the experience of Jesus in Gethsemane and on the cross.

But the absent, silent and forgetful god (42 v 9a) was not the last word. *'Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God'* (42 v 11b and 43 v 5b). Beyond the end of old certainties and the death of old god images there is a new image of God to be experienced, one that makes more sense of our experience, crises and world. We can learn to *'sing a new song'* (Psalm 96 v 1) and with hope in God build a different and new future.

3 Out with the Demons and in with Peace – Luke 8 v 26-39

Today's Gospel is a reworking of an earlier story by Mark (Mark 5 v 1-19). It's a story with more to it than meets the eye. There were demons galore in the 1st century Palestinian world but we misunderstand the art of storytelling from that world if we read literally. And this is not a 21st century scientific, rationalistic response. It is recognising the more subtle and profound art of the Gospel writer.

This is a story of demons and swine, swineherds and drowning and a possessed man *'clothed and in his right mind'*. The deeper clue is in the language. Perhaps more so in Mark than Luke, much of the vocabulary in the story is familiar because of its association with Roman imperialism and armies, including the *'command'* or *'permission'* for the demons to leave. Anyone reading Mark around 70 CE, or Luke around 90 CE, would have got the message.

Galilee and Judea were dominated by the Roman empire's military and economic presence. Poverty and chronic debt were widespread and violence was all pervasive, both the violence of the empire and of the many resistance or paramilitary movements. Hearers and readers knew who or what the demons were and they lived in hope that the demons of poverty, chronic debt and violence would leave their community and that personal, communal, social and economic wholeness would characterise their lives. In the tradition of the prophets and Jesus it was embodied in two words, justice and peace. And this was the essence of what Jesus announced as the kingdom or reign of God, God's SHALOM, total wellbeing and wholeness. So out with the demons and in with peace.

Reflection points us to the future. What kind of Northern Ireland do we want by 2020? Where have we come from and where are we going? Can we now *'cast out'* the demons of sectarianism, racism, inequality, injustice, violence and division? Can we build the future for our children and children's children, based on justice and peace? Can we build our faith and action around Jesus' core reality, the reign of God, God's SHALOM?