

DIOCESE OF
CHICHESTER 



**Who then
is this?**

Lent Course 2023



2023
**Year of the
Old Testament**

A welcome from the Bishop of Chichester

With a Lent course, I always look to see if there are any pictures or drawings, and whether there's something online to download to watch or listen to. It's a sneak preview that tells me whether I'm likely to enjoy it or not.

I hope that in this course you will certainly find something to discover and something to enjoy. I hope it will deepen your faith, whether you are using it in a group with other people, or just with a friend, or on your own. The course seeks to help you pull the meaning of the Old Testament into your encounter with Jesus, sharpening your awareness of his death and resurrection at Easter, and its tremendous significance.

The title of the course, 'Who than is this?' invites us to answer the question that the disciples asked about Jesus when he calmed the storm (Mark 4:41). Just when they thought they were getting to understand him, some astonishing thing happened that made them think again.

We look back to people and events in the Old Testament to help us answer this question with the exploration of our minds and with the devotion of our hearts.

Artists, hymn-writers and Christian teachers have searched the Old Testament for stories that indicate how God's mysterious presence is evident in Jesus in a new and compelling way.

In this Lent Course we shall use their work to explore how accounts of a miraculous birth, a hidden identity, and the capacity to speak the truth wisely and with authority all point to Jesus, who is fully human and fully divine.

There is no right or wrong way to use this course. You will have used it well if you come to Easter Sunday with a richer sense of the resurrection as God's plan for how all things, across time, will come to perfection in the glory of heaven.



Introduction

The forty days of Lent, which prepare us for Easter and our celebration of the glory of Christ's death and resurrection, are intended to help us grow in our faith and discipleship as followers of the risen Lord.

Through prayer, fasting/self-denial, and almsgiving, we strive to become more attentive to God's presence in his word, in our worship, and in the poor and needy.

This year's Lent Course asks a crucial question, one that the first disciples asked about Jesus when faced with his wonderful works and teaching: 'Who then is this?' But it is, and always will be, be a vital question for all who follow Christ and believe him to be the Saviour of the world.

To further that, this course provides rich resources for communities and individuals to explore this question. It offers readings from Holy Scripture accompanied by prayerful reflections and probing questions, accompanied by music, and illustrated by images.

Each unit contains:

A striking image for contemplation

A scriptural passage for reading and pondering alone and/or with others

A profound spiritual reflection

Questions on the theme, for deeper exploration

A hymn

A prayer

The reflections are also available in the form of short podcasts, which can be listened to communally or alone.

Our aim, throughout this course, is to do in Lent what the well-known Advent Collect advises: to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest God's message to us, so as to deepen our discipleship and further our journey as communities and individual believers, seeking closer fellowship with the Lord.

The Revd Dr Earl Collins
CMD Officer,
Diocese of Chichester



Bronze German cross

Week 1: The New Eve: Mary of Nazareth

(Luke 1.39-49)

The Right Rev Christopher Cocksworth, Bishop of Coventry

Bible Reading

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said,

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name."*

Reflection

I've just finished writing a book about Mary of Nazareth, Mother of the Lord. It's called *Mary, Bearer of Life*. Mary bears the life of Christ, the life of God, the Word who is life, through the Spirit who is the giver of life. To bear the life of God, the life that God gives, Mary has to receive the life of God, to say 'yes' to this life. Mary Receiver of life, to be the Bearer of life, to be the Sharer of life. That gives us some sort of basis for these reflections on Mary, the new Eve. And we'll come back to that later.

This typology of Mary as the New Eve became really popular in the church from an early point thanks to some creative thinking by theologians and pastors of the early church from Justin Martyr in the second century onwards. Before going deeper into it there are a couple of preliminary points to make about the need to handle this imagery carefully.

There's a risk that speaking of Mary as the New Eve makes women the problem. And there's been an unfortunate strain of Christian thought that's seen Eve – the woman – as the primordial sinner, the temptress who became the downfall of the man, Adam, and the source of sin for all humanity. Let's be clear that scripture is clear: all have sinned; Adam's sin is as great a sin as Eve's; and Adam must take responsibility for his sin. Indeed, Paul roots human sin and its consequences – death and all the forces of anti-life – in Adam's disobedience

'For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.' (I Corinthians 15.1)

Paul, there, nicely deals with the other risk of speaking of Mary as the new Eve: whatever the contrast and asymmetry between Mary's yes to God's word and Eve's no to God's word, it's not Mary who reverses the effects of the Fall: it's Jesus. Mary receives the life that Jesus brings, she welcomes the salvation that comes from God, she believes God's word, she obeys God's call. Mary shows us how to be saved by the grace of God. We can step into that place where Mary stands and say, 'Here am I (for you); let be to me according to your word'. We can step out of that place where Eve stood and where she said, 'Here am I (for me); let it be to me according to my word'. 'The lost Eve', sang Gregory of Narek, the 10th century Armenian hymn writer,

The Lost Eve
Deprived of life,
Stood still
Next to the Virgin.
Her feet were aching,
Her waist bent,
Limping through life,
Lost compared with the Virgin.

With her shrivelled arms,
With tears she implored:
'Life-giving Saviour,
Give life to the lost'.

'Life-giving Saviour, Give life to the lost'. Eve limps through life, lost and yearning for the sort of fulness of life that she had tried to grasp from the hand of God and possess as her own right. Mary reaches out to take the hand of God, to receive the gift of life that brings life to the world, 'Blessed is she among women, and blessed is the fruit of her womb, Jesus.' No limping through life for this woman, redeemed by the grace of God, the life of Christ: there's standing tall and singing the promise of the lowly being lifted high. There's standing at the cross of her son, when others have fled, 'each to their own home' (John 16.32). There's standing in the streets of Jerusalem, filled with the Spirit of life, proclaiming that her son – the 'Author of life' (Acts 3.15) – has re-written history with the victory of life over anti-life, life over death. Another hymn writer, this time Ephrem the Syrian in the fourth century, wrote:

'Just as from the small womb of Eve's ear
Death entered in and was poured out,
so through a new ear, that was Mary's,
Life entered and was poured out'.

Eve refused to believe God's word of life, and death came to her, and to us all. Mary believed God's word of life, and life came to her and to us all. 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel', which means, "God is with us", foretold Isaiah the prophet (Isaiah 7.14).

Eve's no to God and yes to self, caused her to hide from God and God to bar her from the garden of life. Mary's yes to God and no to self-fear, allowed her to bear God within her, to be filled with the fulness of God. Eve said to the Lord God, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate' (Genesis 3.13) Mary said, 'Let it be to me according your word' (Luke 1.38) And she says to us, 'Do whatever he – my son – tells you' (John 2.5). 'These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name' (John 20.31), says John's Gospel at it draws to a close. 'Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord' (Luke 1.45); and blessed are we when we believe in Jesus, the life of the world.

Questions

- How might the figure of Mary speak most effectively to Christians in our era?
- How should a healthy spirituality view Jesus and his mother?
- What might Mary teach us about true discipleship and mission?
- In what way are the wounds of Christ, the coming down of the Holy Spirit, the cup of the Eucharist, and the prayer of the Church all made one in Christ?

Hymn

Her virgin eyes

(Thomas Ken)

Her Virgin eyes saw God incarnate born,
when she to Bethlem came that happy morn:
how high her raptures then began to swell,
none but her own omniscient Son can tell.

As Eve, when she her fontal sin reviewed,
wept for herself and all she should include,
blest Mary, with man's Saviour in embrace,
joyed for herself and for all human race.

All saints are by her Son's dear influence blest;
she kept the very fountain at her breast:
the Son adored and nursed by the sweet Maid
a thousandfold of love for love repaid.

Heaven with transcendent joys her entrance graced,
near to his throne her Son his Mother placed;
and here below, now she's of heaven possest,
all generations are to call her blest.

Hymn Details: https://hymnary.org/text/her_virgin_eyes_saw_god_incarnate_born

There are many recordings of this hymn available online

Prayer

Almighty and Eternal God,
you restored us to life through the coming of your Son
when he took flesh of Mary and was born as Jesus Christ.
Her obedience, enabled by your grace, reversed the sin
of Eve;
his obedience, even unto death, cancelled Adam's sin
and won for us eternal life.

Through his resurrection pour out your Spirit on us.
Grant that we may faithfully fulfil your will as disciples of
Jesus Christ our Lord,
the true and perfect Adam.

Amen.



Russian Icon of Christ
as High Priest

Week 2: From Melchizedek to Jesus, the Great High Priest

(Hebrews 4.14-16; 5.1-10)

Revd Canon Professor Jenn Strawbridge

Bible Reading

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness, and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honour but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest but was appointed by the one who said to him,

“You are my Son;
today I have begotten you”;

as he says also in another place,
“You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Reflection

Melchizedek. A name mentioned two times in the Old Testament, only found in Hebrews in the New Testament, and immortalised across hymns and worship songs. But who is this mysterious figure and why does he matter? Most obviously, as we reflect on the 'types' of Christ (i.e., those Old Testament persons and prophecies fulfilled in him), the occurrences of Melchizedek in the New Testament are intimately connected with Jesus. Twice in only a few verses of Hebrews 5 – the only book in the New Testament to call Jesus a high priest – Jesus is described as 'A high priest according to the order of Melchizedek' (5.6, quoting Psalm 110; and 5.10). Melchizedek, a king and priest, is the fundamental key for how the author of Hebrews proclaims Jesus as...king and priest.

And because of this link, the author of Hebrews can make further significant claims about who Jesus is. Jesus as high priest was appointed by God, atones for sins, deals 'gently with the ignorant and wayward', 'offered up prayers and supplications', suffered, and ultimately 'became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him' (5.1-10). Hebrews bases these claims firmly on the connection between Jesus and Melchizedek.

But why? Why does the author of Hebrews need Melchizedek's priestly order to make these claims about Jesus? If we take a step back, we find that in ancient Jewish tradition, the high priest appointed by God had a very significant role. He was a person who stood before God with the people on his heart, offered sacrifices to God in the Temple for the atonement of sins, and was the only one who could enter the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary in the Temple, where God's presence was made manifest. And key for understanding Hebrews, high priests were always chosen from the same Jewish tribe: the tribe of Levi (Numbers 17-18).

But of course, this is where calling Jesus a high priest gets tricky, because Jesus is not from the tribe of Levi! As we find across the gospels, Hebrews, and the Book of Revelation, Jesus is from the tribe of Judah (see Matthew 1.2; Luke 3.22; Hebrews 7.14; Revelation 5.5). And thus, because Jesus is from the tribe of Judah and not Levi, he cannot be a high priest. It would seem that 'High priest' must be an incorrect title for Jesus.

This, however, is where the author of Hebrews is immensely clever, and this is where Melchizedek enters the picture, because Melchizedek was a priest. According to Genesis 14 he is king of Salem and 'priest of the most high God' and, significantly, he is not a Levite. Why? Because Melchizedek is a priest before Levi was born. He is a priest before the first High Priest Aaron was born. In fact, Melchizedek was the high priest for Levi's great-grandfather and Aaron's great-great-great grandfather, Abraham. As we find in Hebrews, Levi 'was still in the loins of his ancestor' when Melchizedek met Abraham (7.9-10). For Genesis tells us that Melchizedek knew Abraham, offered him bread and wine and blessed him after a battle, and in return Abraham offers a tithe of all his possessions to Melchizedek (Genesis 14.18-20).

So Melchizedek isn't just a great high priest, he is Abraham's priest to whom Abraham – Abram at the time – makes an offering. And thus he isn't only a model high priest, the priest before all high priests, his is also the one who we are told in Psalm 110 – one of the most quoted psalms in the New Testament – will be the order that the messiah will be from. For the messianic figure in Psalm 110 isn't simply a king but is a king and a priest in the order of Melchizedek.

According to Hebrews then, Melchizedek tells us a lot about who Jesus is. As described in Genesis and the Psalms, Melchizedek is the first and therefore greatest of priests, he is eternal having 'no father or mother' (Hebrews 7.3) – he is given no genealogy in Genesis. Moreover, he blesses Abraham rather than descends from him, and it is in this line, in this order of priests, that Jesus is high priest. For Jesus too is a priest forever (7.17). Jesus too is a superior high priest not through the descendants of Levi (7.11). And all of this is because Jesus is in the order of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek therefore offers both the way around the Levitical requirement for high priests in Jesus' time, and the way for Hebrews to place Jesus in a different kind of priestly order, one that pre-dates the Levites, one that ministers even to Abraham, one that the great Jewish patriarch recognises as significant. Melchizedek is the reason Jesus can be called high priest. At the same time, like any type, their high priesthoods are different. For unlike the Levitical High Priest, Jesus doesn't make continual sacrifices in a temple. Instead, Jesus made one sacrifice on the cross that atones for sin once and for all. He is the high priest in the heavenly temple, rather than the earthly one.

Of course we have to be careful with a simplistic replacement theology, which would argue that Jesus replaced ancient Jewish tradition or superseded it. Hebrews can easily be read as arguing that. But as we see here in Hebrews, the understanding of Jesus as high priest relies on Jewish texts, ancient Jewish traditions, and ancient Jewish understandings of sacrifice and atonement. And because Jesus is in the line of Melchizedek, he has, according to the author of Hebrews, every right to be called high priest.

So while Melchizedek only plays a small role in Old Testament texts as a mysterious figure mentioned only in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110, he takes on a significant role in Hebrews (chapter 5 and 7) as his presence secures and defends the title of High Priest for Jesus. Thanks to Melchizedek's priestly ministry to Abraham, we better understand how it is that we sing to Jesus, our great high priest, who is both priest and victim, in the eucharistic feast.

Questions

- What does the coming of Jesus teach us about the meaning of priesthood?
- According to Hebrews, what is characteristic of Jesus as our great High Priest?
- What share do all Christians – not only the ordained – have in the priesthood of Christ?
- In the icon shown above, Jesus is robed as a bishop/ high priest: does this help or hinder your understanding of his priesthood?

Hymn

We Hail Thy Presence Glorious

(Richard Godfrey Parsons)

We hail thy Presence glorious,
O Christ our great high Priest,
O'er sin and death victorious,
At thy thanksgiving feast:
As thou art interceding
For us in heaven above,
Thy Church on earth is pleading
Thy perfect work of love.

2. Through thee in every nation
Thine own their hearts upraise,
Offering one pure Oblation,
One Sacrifice of praise:
With thee in blest communion
The living and the dead
Are joined in closest union,
One Body with one Head.

O living Bread from heaven,
Jesu, our Saviour good,
Who thine own self hast given
To be our souls' true food;
For us thy body broken
Hung on the Cross of shame:
This Bread its hallowed token
We break in thy dear name.

O stream of love unending,
Poured from the one true Vine,
With our weak nature blending
The strength of life divine;
Our thankful faith confessing
In thy life-blood outpoured,
We drink this Cup of blessing
And praise thy name, O Lord.

May we thy word believing
Thee through thy gifts receive,
That, thou within us living,
We all to God may live;
Draw us from earth to heaven
Till sin and sorrow cease,
Forgiving and forgiven,
In love and joy and peace

Hymn Details: https://hymnary.org/text/we_hail_thy_presence_glorious
There are many recordings of this hymn available online.

Prayer

Almighty God, you sent your only Son
as the one true Mediator between God and humankind.
Faithful to your will he offered himself,
once and for all, on the altar of the cross,
as a saving sacrifice for sin and so fulfilled all other offerings.
By the power of your Holy Spirit
may our bread and wine, like that offered by your priest
Melchizedek,
become a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and may the blessing of Abraham extend throughout the earth.
Make us a people who proclaim with joy that you have called us out of darkness
into your own wonderful light;
through Jesus, our great High Priest.
Amen.



Painting by L. Bourgeois

Week 3: Joseph: Betrayed, Sold, Hidden in Plain Sight

(Genesis 45. 1-15)

Rev Canon Professor James Walters

Bible Reading

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you

many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me; do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there, since there are five more years of famine to come, so that you and your household and all that you have will not come to poverty.' And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them, and after that his brothers talked with him.

Reflection

We all know that difference can divide. Racism, xenophobia, homophobia and misogyny are all ways in which human beings mistreat and direct violence towards those who are different from themselves. But what truly shocks us about the human condition is that violence can just as easily be directed towards those who are like us, those who share our culture, our ethnicity and our religion. Orthodox clergy in both the Russian and Ukrainian churches have described the war between their countries as a fratricidal war, a war between brothers. Their peoples have a shared history, a shared faith, a shared story.

And so Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and all Ukraine has described it “as a repetition of the sin of Cain, who killed his own brother out of envy.”

In the opening chapters of the Bible, brother kills brother. Cain kills Abel because he wants to be the one whom the Lord favours. And as the story goes on, this theme of enmity between brothers continues. Isaac and Ishmael are the next set of half-brothers who are rivals for the favour of their father Abraham, coming together only to bury him. Isaac’s sons Jacob and Esau are similarly at war as Jacob steals his brother’s birth right and Esau vows to kill him.

But this lineage of warring brothers comes to an end in the book of Genesis with the one whom Jewish tradition calls Yosef HaTzadik, Joseph the Righteous. As this figure of righteousness, Joseph tends to be given much more prominence in Judaism than in our Christian reading of the Old Testament. To us he may just be the seemingly arrogant and (literally!) colourful character in the entertaining story retold in a thousand school productions of Andrew Lloyd Weber’s hit musical. We probably reflect little on this story in our own faith. But we should think again, because for us Christians, the “righteousness” with which Jewish tradition associates him foreshadows two aspects of the righteousness of Jesus.

First, Joseph resists temptation. This happens when he is sold into slavery in Egypt and resists the persistent attempts at seduction by the wife of his master Potiphar. She eventually frames him when he won’t return her advances. Adultery is a carnal temptation. But psychologically, it’s also the temptation to be the favoured one, to feel chosen in opposition to a rival or in the context of a relationship that no longer leaves one feeling chosen.

Christ too resists temptation, a theme we reflect upon in Lent. He was tempted by the devil in the wilderness at the start of his ministry. This was also physical - in the temptation to break his fast by turning stones into bread. But it culminated in the temptation to be the one chosen for power, the one given the kingdoms of the world. So both Joseph and Jesus resist the temptation to be chosen for privilege and pleasure, instead recognising a more sacrificial calling.

And this points to the second way in which Joseph is understood to be righteous. He did not take revenge on the brothers who attempted to kill him. He did not commit the sin of Cain; he forgave his brothers and, in his privileged status in Egypt, pledged to take care of them. As a result, there is no fratricide, there are no winners and losers in the story of Joseph. Instead all are favoured, each of the brothers chosen as the head of Israel’s twelve tribes. And this is how the book of Genesis concludes. The cycle of fratricide is brought to an end. Brother forgives brother, and one is not chosen above the other: all are chosen for the purposes of God.

And this, of course, prefigures the heart of the Gospel. Jesus is betrayed by his ‘brother’ Judas and denied by his ‘brother’ Peter. But these are mere tokens of all the treachery and human sin that Jesus takes into himself on the cross. This is why Jesus is described as the sacrifice made once and for all. He is the incarnation of the God who does not hold our sins against us and demand that they be atoned for. He is the atonement, the limitless well of forgiveness to whom we can turn in repentance when we have wronged other people in our own pursuit of favour or the desire to feel chosen.

This link between Joseph’s granting of forgiveness to his brothers and the forgiveness Christ brings is perhaps most clearly expressed in the words Joseph uses to express the pardon: “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?” “Do not be afraid” is the constant refrain that heralds the Gospel. The angel Gabriel says it to Mary. Jesus repeatedly says it to his disbelieving disciples. The angel says it to the astonished women who arrive at the empty tomb. And fundamentally we are not to be afraid because God is in charge. Justice belongs to God, not to us. Judgement is God’s to enact, not ours to wield over relentless human rivalries. It is God whom we face in our guilt, and in Christ his message to us is forgiveness.

And so, as with the story of Joseph, this points to a righteousness that enables all people to be chosen, knowing that they live with the favour of God such that they need not be consumed by envy or resentment of others. That can be the case in our families and personal lives where we learn to forgive those who have sinned against us because we have the knowledge that God has forgiven us our own sins. And it ought also to be the case in our world, particularly between Christian nations, as we recognise that those whom God has called into being and loved into new life through baptism simply cannot be killed in the pursuit of national ambitions.

So let us pray for all who are at war – in wars of individuals or nations, wars of difference or fratricidal wars - that we may find righteousness through resisting temptation and by knowing that we do not stand in the place of God. We stand before God who, in Christ, has exercised an abundant forgiveness that has favoured and chosen each one of us.

Questions

- What do you think Joseph and Jesus have in common – how does the former look forward to the latter?
- Why is it so difficult to forgive – especially those closest to us?
- What does it really mean to say that Jesus is the 'atonement' for human sins?
- What do you think the emotions of the various people depicted in this picture might tell us about their previous behaviour?

Hymn

Forgive our Sins as we Forgive

(E. Herklots)

Forgive our sins as we forgive
You taught us, Lord, to pray,
But you alone can grant us grace
To live the words we say.

How can your pardon reach and bless
The unforgiving heart
That broods on wrongs and will not let
Old bitterness depart?

In blazing light your cross reveals
The truth we dimly knew:
What trivial debts are owed to us;
How great our debt to you!

Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls
And bid resentment cease;
Then, bound to all in bonds of love
Our lives will spread your peace.

Hymn Details : https://hymnary.org/text/forgive_our_sins_as_we_forgive
There are many recordings of this hymn available online.

Prayer

Almighty and eternal God,
like Joseph, your only Son was betrayed by those he loved.

As in your mercy you raised Joseph from the pit,
so too you raised Jesus on high, crowning him with honour and glory.

Help us like them to bear courageously the pain of betrayal.

As disciples of Jesus, who prayed even for his persecutors,
free us all from bitterness and every yearning for revenge.

We ask this in his name, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.



*'Christ and the Woman
taken in Adultery'
Painting by Mazzolino*

Week 4: Moses and Jesus: Shepherd and Lawgiver

(John 8.1-11)

Dr Joost Joustra

Bible Reading

...Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and, making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Reflection

Ludovico Mazzolino painted a bustling scene on a small vertical panel no more than half a metre high with a rounded top. It shows two groups of people: the first above in the distance on a raised plateau underneath an elaborate portico. On the foreground steps, the second group closer to us seem to be in the midst of fierce debate. Jesus is immediately recognisable in the centre. The group in front of him presents a woman with a downcast gaze. Christ seems to be arguing with the men in this group, pointing at them and at himself as if he is rebuking an accusation. In front of them, three figures are looking down, examining, and discussing a sentence that has appeared on the ground. The words will be familiar to many, although Mazzolino painted them in Hebrew:

‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’

The Gospel of John tells how the Scribes and Pharisees brought to Christ a young woman accused of committing adultery. They asked him whether the woman should be stoned to death for her crime in accordance with the law, hoping to trick Christ into contradicting those laws. Then he stooped down and wrote the above words with his finger on the ground. They kept asking him and Jesus replied with those words. Then he bent down and wrote on the ground again. Slowly, one by one, the Scribes and Pharisees left, troubled by their own consciences. Finally, Jesus was left alone with the accused woman:

‘Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”’

But where does Moses fit into this story? Typology is not merely about texts. Artists too, have ingeniously connected the Old with the New Testament and vice versa. Especially in Medieval illuminated Bible manuscripts like the Bible Moralisée, and in the later Medieval and Renaissance tradition, the printed and more affordable Biblia Pauperum, (“Paupers’ Bible”) visual typology is explicitly employed. These manuscripts and printed books only contained selections of the text of the Bible, along with commentary and illustrations. Each page pairs Old and New Testament episodes with illustrations explaining their moral significance in terms of typology.

Mazzolino’s painting uses it in a subtle manner. It takes a while for the viewer to notice it. Behind Christ, further back and to the left of the second figural group amid ongoing Temple life, Mazzolino painted an illusionistic monochrome relief in a roundel, meant to evoke sculptural decoration familiar to his sixteenth-century audience in Ferrara. In tones of brown and gold that evoke bronze, it takes a moment for the relief’s subject to register: Moses delivering the tablets of the law to the Israelites. We see Moses standing on a rock presenting the tablets inscribed with God’s word like an opened book, facing right like Jesus below. Onlookers read,

argue, and point in a manner that is not far removed from the foreground Gospel scene. One of the laws the Israelites would have read states ‘You shall not commit adultery’, but these words are only implied here, unlike the Hebrew sentence on the ground.

A typological dichotomy seems increasingly clear: Jesus appears placed in opposition to Moses. The words from the Gospel of John are often interpreted as Jesus’s superseding of Moses as lawgiver. ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her’ feels like a rebuttal of the crowds pointing fingers, strictly interpreting Mosaic law. Jesus seems to say, ‘do not point your accusatory fingers at this woman implying her breaking the law without pointing it at yourselves first’, prompting self-questioning instead of strict adherence. And indeed, Mazzolino painted Jesus pointing the finger at himself as well as at the woman.

But there is more to it. Jesus is far from rejecting the Law of Moses, in fact, his understanding of the law is more precise than that of the Scribes and Pharisees: the witnesses upon whose testimony the woman had been accused of a capital crime must come forward. To repeat Jesus’s words above once more, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ Jesus recognised that the accusation was based on second-hand evidence. Therefore, the woman answers “No one, sir”, which leads Jesus to reply ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.’

He is in this sense not superseding Moses as lawgiver but instead enforcing the law in its proper reading. The focus is no longer on the accusatory mob’s charge against the woman. Jesus instead places the responsibility on the accusers to put forward their witnesses or release the accused. What in Mazzolino’s painting first may seem a typological opposition between Moses and Christ, can in fact be understood as a typological resemblance: Jesus in Moses’s footsteps.

Indeed, moments later in the Gospel of John, Christ elaborates: ‘You judge by human standards; I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgement is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf’ (John 8.15-18).

Mazzolino painted another bronze roundel mirroring the delivery of the tablets. It again features Moses, although the exact subject of this relief is difficult to make out. What is clear is the subtly meaningful typology introduced in Mazzolino’s painting: the central figure of the Old Testament as forerunner to the central figure of the New Testament, and the latter fulfilling this role. Going back to the first chapter of John’s Gospel: ‘The law indeed was given through Moses but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’ (John 1.17).

Questions

- How do you view the relationship between Moses as lawgiver and Jesus as the embodiment of grace and truth?
- How far should our forgiveness go?
- Why does Jesus repeatedly warn us against judging others?
- How did Jesus in dealing with the woman taken in adultery and her self-righteous accusers communicate his word of judgement and reconciliation through his 'body language – and how might we do the same in our own life with others?

Hymn

There's a Wideness in God's Mercy

(F.W. Faber)

There's a wideness in God's mercy,
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice
which is more than liberty.

There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more keenly felt than heaven:
there is no place where earth's failings
have such gracious judgement given.

There is plentiful redemption
through the blood that Christ has shed;
there is joy for all the members
in the sorrows of the head.

For the love of God is broader
than the measure of our mind;
and the heart of the eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

If our love were but more simple,
we should take him at his word;
and our lives would be illumined,
by the glory of the Lord.

Hymn Details: https://hymnary.org/text/theres_a_wideness_in_gods_mercy

There are many recordings of this hymn available online.

Prayer

Blessed are you, Lord God of our salvation.

You heard your people as they cried to you from slavery
and sent Moses to lead them to a land of milk and honey.

Bringing them safely through the waters of the Red Sea
you gave them the law on Sinai.

In the fullness of time your incarnate Word, Jesus Christ
our Lord,

brought us the good news of grace and truth through the
power of his name.

By your Holy Spirit free us from judging others.

Let your grace reign in our hearts

and fill us with the joy of Christ's transforming love.

We ask in Jesus' name.

Amen.



Enamel, Verdun Altar,
France, 1181

Week 5: The Queen of Sheba: ‘Something Greater is Here’

(2 Chronicles 9.1-12)

by Dr Anne Loades

Bible Reading

When the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon, she came to Jerusalem to test him with riddles, having a very great retinue and camels bearing spices and very much gold and precious stones. When she came to Solomon, she discussed with him all that was on her mind. Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing hidden from Solomon that he could not explain to her. When the queen of Sheba had observed the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, the food of his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, and their clothing, his valets, and their clothing, and his burnt offerings that he offered at the house of the Lord, it took her breath away. So she said to the king, “The report was true that I heard in my own land of your accomplishments and of your wisdom, but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes saw it. Not even half of the greatness of your wisdom had been told to me; you far surpass the report that I had heard. Happy are your people! Happy are these your servants who continually attend you and hear your wisdom!

Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on his throne as king, for the Lord your God. Because your God loved Israel and would establish them forever, he has made you king over them, that you may execute justice and righteousness.” Then she gave the king one hundred and twenty talents of gold, a very great quantity of spices, and precious stones; there were no spices such as those that the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon. Moreover, the servants of Hiram and the servants of Solomon who brought gold from Ophir brought albug wood and precious stones. From the albug wood, the king made steps for the house of the Lord and for the king’s house, lyres also and harps for the singers; there never was seen the like of them before in the land of Judah. Meanwhile, King Solomon gave to the queen of Sheba every desire that she expressed, well beyond what she had brought to the king. Then she returned to her own land with her servants.

Reflection

If we've heard of the Queen of Sheba at all it might be because we've heard the composer Handel's splendid eighteenth-century piece, 'the arrival of the Queen of Sheba' which prompt us to imagine a simply magnificent royal occasion. Like many others, Handel had enjoyed reading about her arrival to the court of King Solomon in two places in our Bibles: chapter ten in the first book of Kings (Kings 10.1-13) and chapter nine in the second book of Chronicles (2 Chronicles 9.1-12).

Her visit will have taken place a few years after Solomon had survived the conflicts of the last years of his warrior father, King David, so ruling sometime after 960 B.C. Solomon was tough enough to establish his court in palatial buildings, was builder of a splendid temple, and was securing his country's boundaries. He was up-dating the army with horses and chariots, and even funding a merchant navy. Any neighbouring ruler sufficiently well-established would find him an ally in keeping empire-building competitors at bay, and in setting up trade with him. That is probably why he received an extraordinary visitor, from Sheba, somewhere in the South, quite possibly from what we know nowadays as Saba in the Yemen.

The texts we have about the visit of the Queen of Sheba make a point of stressing that her main interest in visiting was her interest in the God who had been so good to Solomon, so she had a lot to ask. In any event she arrived in great style with a great train of camels (indispensable in the desert) bearing packs of spices including frankincense and myrrh from a richly prosperous land, but also gold from her mines and precious stones brought via the trade routes which stretched far away to the east. She had found out in advance what would please Solomon!

And of course, she herself would have looked simply magnificent in what we might now call 'bling.' We can assume that neither she nor Solomon would be outdone in splendour. Down the ages therefore she has been a gift to artists of different kinds. Handel was far from unique in writing music to imagine her arrival, and unsurprisingly she has been a subject of fascination to painters and sculptors, metal workers who decorated the great doors of major churches, makers of stained-glass windows within such places of worship and other great architectural settings, and in our time film-sets reinventing such magnificence. Since she has been celebrated in poetry and legends, not least in the Middle East, but especially in Judaism and Islam, she is also found in many different cultures and traditions world-wide. And so long as Ethiopia was an Empire, its emperors claimed her as their ancestor.

What the biblical text indicates, however, is not only the magnificence of the Queen's visit, but their spiritual exchanges. As well as reading from Chronicles, look back into First Kings, chapter three (1 Kings 3.1-15), and find there Solomon's dream, in which God asks him what he wants from God and gives Solomon what he most desires, which is 'a wise and understanding heart'; then

in chapter four 'largeness of heart (1 Kings 4.29-34), even as the sand that is on the seashore'. So he becomes wiser and more learned than any of his contemporaries, a writer of proverbs and songs, knowledgeable about the natural world. No wonder then that he had great visitors like the Queen of Sheba.

She came on her own account to make her own judgement about his reputation for wisdom, confident that she herself is perfectly capable of taking him on. For we read right at the beginning of chapter 10 that she came to test him with hard questions, that she spoke with him about all that was in her heart, and that he gave to her all her desire, whatever he asked. Solomon was generous and informative. She made her own judgment of the splendour in which he reigned, perhaps even enough to be somewhat intimidated at one point we might say, because as the text puts it, her breath was taken away! But she finds the courage not merely to thank Solomon, but to exercise her own authority in blessing him by praising God:

'Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on his throne as king, for the Lord your God. Because your God loved Israel and would establish them forever, he has made you king over them, that you may execute justice and righteousness'.

In her own way, therefore, she reminds Solomon of what he had asked for, and what God had given him before their final exchange of gifts, and her departure. This, however, is not the end of the story.

We have two more texts to look at, to follow up from the Queen of Sheba's visit, the first of which is Psalm 72. We can see that it is a plea that a king would reign as though with the wisdom of Solomon, with special care for the poor and needy. The psalm also as it were renews the memory of the visit of the Queen of Sheba and expresses hope for the continuation of exchanges between the king and her successors: 'the kings of Sheba and Saba shall offer gifts', to him shall be given of the gold of Sheba', (picked up in St Matthew's account of the visit of strangers from the East to the newborn Jesus and his family at Bethlehem).

But this psalm is above all a prayer which directs the ruler's attention to those who most need his wisdom, in particular, anyone who has no helper. Thus a ruler may be remembered as blessed by the Lord God, who fills the whole earth with his glory. And we find that Jesus of Nazareth in some sense knows himself to embody divine blessing (Mt.12.42; Luke 11. 31). As he said:

'The Queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and indeed something greater than Solomon is here!'

Jesus is another bearer – indeed an infinitely greater bearer - of royal wisdom and even more with a heart as vast as the sand on the seashore (Colossians 2.3).

Questions

- What does this story tell us about God's presence beyond the chosen people Israel?
- How important is wisdom in living life?
- How does Jesus embody God's wisdom for us as Colossians tells us he does?
- Looking at the picture above, what might a wisdom-filled Christian perspective on inclusion look like?

Hymn

The perfect Wisdom of our God

(Stuart Townend)

The perfect wisdom of our God
Revealed in all the universe:
All things created by His hand
And held together at His command.
He knows the mysteries of the seas,
The secrets of the stars are His;
He guides the planets on their way
And turns the earth through another day.

The matchless wisdom of His ways
That mark the path of righteousness;
His word a lamp unto my feet,
His Spirit teaching and guiding me.
And O the mystery of the cross,
That God should suffer for the lost,
So that the fool might shame the wise,
And all the glory might go to Christ!

O grant me wisdom from above,
To pray for peace and cling to love,
And teach me humbly to receive
The sun and rain of Your sovereignty.
Each strand of sorrow has a place
Within this tapestry of grace;
So through the trials I choose to say:
"Your perfect will in Your perfect way.

Hymn Details: https://hymnary.org/tune/the_perfect_wisdom_of_our_god_revealed_i

Online Version: <https://youtu.be/hSnzYnOe6kl>

Prayer

Eternal Wisdom of God,
Jesus Christ our Lord:
let your light shine in our hearts.
Fill us with the joy of your holy resurrection,
for you are the splendour of eternal light
and the radiance of the Father's glory,
in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and
knowledge.
By the power of the Holy Spirit,
we glorify you,
now and forever.
Amen.

Dr Anne Loades RIP

Just a few days after submitting this reflection,
Dr Anne Loades died.

Anne was a wonderfully gifted scholar, and she
will be much missed.

We are indeed grateful for the benefit of her
wisdom shared with us in this Lent Course
May she rest in peace and rise in glory.