

New victories

I want to put a word in for the Church of England lectionary, which is the list of readings a church may use Sunday by Sunday or on each weekday. Nowadays, among some of our Anglican churches, it is not popular as a preaching tool but as someone who preaches from it I often find it be excellent. Take today, for example, the 3rd Sunday in Epiphany. There is a theme running through today's three readings. Let's take a look, shall we?

New blessing

Genesis 14 is one of the most tantalising and mysterious passages in the history of the patriarchs. In this particular incident in the life of Abram four kings are mentioned by name. We'll loosely call them the bad kings. Our best guess as to when these events happened is probably sometime during the early to mid-eighteenth century BC. We can read about these four kings in verse one of chapter 14. Verse two tells us that they went to war against five other kings. We'll call them the good kings. The context of these two chapters in Genesis is separation. In chapter 13 Abram and Lot had parted company. Abram offered Lot first dibs on where to go; *"Let's not have any quarrelling between you and me for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left."* Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, so Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. *The two men parted company. So Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom.*

Chapter 14 is, I guess, a salutatory lesson against making choices solely on the basis that something looks good. The cities of the plain, Lot's chosen location because it was well watered and therefore fertile, becomes a war zone between all these fighting kings and, because he's living there, Lot gets caught up in this and finds himself carried away by the four kings along with all his possessions. So good old Uncle Abram had to go and rescue him, which he did with 318 of his trained men, an indication of Abram's wealth and prestige.

And so Abram rescued Lot and returned all the plundered possessions. And now to verse 17: *After Abram returned from defeating...the kings, the king of Sodom came out to meet him...Well, he was doubtless thrilled at getting his plundered goods back, I would have thought. But then, without warning, somebody else appears in the narrative. Verse 18: Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High...and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand."*

And then, following this appearance to Abram, Melchizedek disappears without trace for something like a couple of thousand years. He does get a mention in Psalm 110, verse 4 but then it's hundreds of years later before the writer to the Hebrews mentions him in chapter 7:11-17. Melchizedek remains a mysterious figure, but he sets an important precedent for the Messiah, namely that the same man can serve as both priest and king. After the establishment of the 12 tribes of Israel, from the 12 sons of Jacob, Jewish priests would come from the tribe of Levi. Aaron, who was the first high priest, was of that tribe. Levites were to be set aside to perform holy service in the tabernacle of the Lord in the desert and then in the holy temple. Kings, on the other hand, would come from the tribe of Judah. King David was of the tribe of Judah, an important fact to bear in mind as we consider where this is taking us.

During his brief appearance to Abram we're told that Melchizedek, king of Salem, does two things; first he brought out bread and wine and secondly he blessed Abram. We need to understand the significance of these two acts. You see, Melchizedek was a type of Christ, pre-figuring the Messiah. Through this we can see that way back, almost in pre-history, God was at work because eventually there would be another Melchizedek, another who would also be priest and king, namely God's own son, the Messiah. He too would also offer bread and wine, but this time the bread and wine would represent his own blood shed and his own body given. Bread, wine and blessing, three things offered to the people by a priest, but in Melchizedek, and later in Jesus Christ, they would also be offered by a king.

New clothes

And now to our passage in Revelation 19. A vain Emperor, who cares for nothing but his appearance and his clothes, employs two tailors to make him a new suit of clothes. However, it turns out the tailors are swindlers. They promise the emperor the finest suit of clothes made from a fabric invisible to anyone who is "unfit for his position" or "just hopelessly stupid". The Emperor himself cannot see the cloth, so he pretends he can for fear of appearing unfit for his position; his ministers do the same. When the swindlers report that the suit is finished they pretend to dress him in it and so the Emperor marches in procession before his subjects, who play along with the pretence. Suddenly, a child in the crowd, too young to understand the need to keep up the pretence, blurts out that the Emperor is wearing nothing at all and the cry is taken up by others. The Emperor cringes, suspecting the statement to be true, but he holds himself up proudly and continues the procession, deciding never again to be so vain and to take his position more seriously. A summary, of course, of Hans Christian Anderson timeless story, *The Emperor's new clothes*.

Unfortunately, like the Emperor, we don't have the right clothes. You see we've been invited to a wedding supper, Revelation chapter 19, verse 9 tells us that. *"Then the angel said (to me), 'Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!' " And he added, "These are the true words of God."* That last bit is like when Jesus says, *I tell you the truth*. In other words, this is important.

But we've been invited to a wedding supper and every wedding I've ever been invited to requires that I look my best. Mind you, it's probably a bit different for us blokes; you know, get the 10 year old suit cleaned, find a clean shirt and we're away. I know for the ladies it's a much more taxing exercise. But, ladies and gents, I've got good news for you; the clothes for the wedding supper of the Lamb will be supplied! Verse 7: *For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was available for hire from Moss Bros, no, was given her to wear."*

Then there's a little note in the text of our passage which reads as follows: *Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints*. So that's us blown out of the water then, I reckon. Speaking for myself I've not got nearly enough righteous acts under my belt to qualify for

even a clean pair of socks, let alone a full wedding outfit. Ah, but listen to Roman 5, verse 17: *For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.* The righteousness we need to have, so we can wear the fine linen clothes at the wedding supper, even that is provided for us. So here again we find again more provision, more blessing and doubtless more food and wine.

New wine

Now let's turn now to the reading from John's gospel, a gospel which is very different in style from the other three, known collectively as the Synoptic gospels. The miracles recorded in John's gospel are theologically different from those found in the synoptic gospels. That's because each of the gospel writers has an angle. Matthew wants to show that the miracles are a demonstration of the coming kingdom of heaven and what that will be like. Mark seeks to answer two questions; who is Jesus and what did he come to do, Luke, who was most likely a Gentile, writes a gospel that has a thoroughly Gentile outlook and one that is full of humanity with its concern for the poor, the marginalised, and for women who had very little status in Palestine. As an aside we mustn't consider the definition of a gospel to be an attempt to compile a biography of the entire life of Jesus; that would be wrong. A gospel is telling the story of Jesus in such a way that the unique significance of his person and work shines through and each writer, as I say, has his own angle.

John, in his gospel, records seven miracles from Jesus 3-year ministry and one from after his resurrection. They include the feeding of the 5000, which is the only miracle found in all four of the gospels, the miraculous walking on the water, which is found in three of the gospels, and then five others which are found in John alone and it is around these seven miracles that John organises his account of Jesus public ministry. However, according to John, these miracles are signs, or more accurately, miraculous signs. In our reading today, at verse 11, we read, *"This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee."* And that phrase, *miraculous signs*, appears a further 16 times in the gospel. John's concern was with the profound meaning of what Jesus had said and done. So, what is this particular

miraculous sign all about? Well the clue is in the surprise of the master of the banquet concerning the quality of the new wine. From verse 7; *Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water". Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."*

So, notice exactly what Jesus did; he turned water into wine. What water and what was it doing there? Well the text tells us that it was there for ceremonial washing; that would have been the washing of hands. Do you remember in Matthew 15 the Pharisees encounter with Jesus about the washing of hands? *Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!* You see the old Jewish law required the washing of hands before eating and those water pots were there for that purpose. But the problem with hand washing is you've got to repeat it over and over again. It brings no permanent solution. Once is never enough. So, by turning that water into wine Jesus wasn't just seeking to provide an answer for a catering disaster, although that he surely did, but was demonstrating that the new law of the Spirit of God, represented by the wine, is better than the old Jewish laws, represented by the water. The best wine had truly been left to the last; the testimony of the master of the banquet proved that. And for us this *miraculous sign* recorded by John says the same thing. The new wine of the kingdom will be far better than the old water of the law.