

## **Readings for Ordinary 2 Year B 14-20 January**

Immediately after the feast of the Epiphany the Revised Common Lectionary, as used in the Methodist church, moves into Ordinary Time. The Anglican Church uses the same readings, but designates the first Sunday after Epiphany as commemorating the Baptism of Christ.

### **OT**

#### **1 Sam 3:1-10 (11-20)**

“Hushed was the evening hymn, the temple courts were dark” – so run some very familiar words about this story. But when we read “temple” we should banish from our minds any concept like “cathedral” – which was clearly what the hymn-writer had in mind! The “temple” at Shiloh (just north of Beth-El) was more likely a tent situated in a small enclosure. The tent would have been big enough to allow one or two priests to offer sacrifice, and above all to house the priceless Ark of the Covenant. It would also have accommodated a table on which were placed a few flat round loaves – the Bread of the Presence, or showbread. In terms of worship it was more a shrine than a temple – a place where a great procession of people would have offered their devotions to Yahweh.

Earlier in 1 Sam, Hannah is recorded as “praying in the temple”, which again conjures up an image of a woman with her head covered seated half-way long the nave of a cathedral. It is more likely that Hannah would have been worshipping at that shrine. Little Samuel would perhaps have lived in another tent in the enclosure, unless he was on duty guarding the Ark.

When we read of the conversation between Eli and Samuel it is possible to sense a growing anxiety on Eli’s part. He knows he is himself growing old and sooner rather than later his place will be taken by a successor. More significant, maybe, is that fact that Eli is well aware of the shortcomings of his sons Hophni and Phinehas. They have brought great dishonour on the office of Priest (see 2:12-17), and it could just be that in the midnight visitation to Samuel Eli can hear the first rumblings of divine disapproval.

All this, of course, is running in parallel as a kind of back-story to the call of Samuel. The more closely we look at this story the more clearly we can see how Luke has built upon it in his account of Jesus’ birth and childhood. Think of the presentation in the temple (Luke 2:22-38); Jesus’ conversations with the scholars in the temple (Luke 2: 41-51) – not forgetting the tension between Nazareth and Jerusalem paralleling that between the hill-country of Ephraim and the shrine at Shiloh; think too of the time Jesus spent with God, not in the rush-lit shrine but in the wilderness (Luke 4: 1-13)

#### **Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18**

These verses from Psalm 139 – an eternal favourite – sing of God’s omniscience, his comprehensive knowledge of all things. Almost every verse

rings with profound and deeply humbling challenges. Look for example at verse 5: *you hem me in behind and before*. What are we to make of verse 16: *In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed*.

### **Epistle: 1 Cor 6: 12-20**

The Anglican lectionary associates this reading with the third service of the day, not the first. It is part of a length argument that Paul is having with a group of Corinthians who are, supposedly, strong in the faith, insistent upon their liberty in Christ – their claim is simply that Christ has set them free so they are going to exercise that freedom. Their slogan is: *All things are lawful*. Read around this passage to find what else, in their view, that freedom consisted of. Here it appears to be prostitution – a practice that was totally accepted at the time as being free from any kind of stigma or shame. Later in the letter there are other issues – many of which related to food: food that has been offered to idols, and the attendant social gatherings; mixing a dinner party for a select few with a Eucharist so that the select few ate well and the ordinary church members ate junk food. The cry of these Corinthians was *All things are lawful*, but Paul's response is to urge them to recognise that *not all things are beneficial*. Beneficial to whom? Paul is quite clear about this. What matters above all for committed Christians is the well-being and unity of the people of God. Personal liberties, even when it is possible to point to Christ as the deliverer, take second place to this over-riding objective. The clincher here is that Christ has certainly set you free, but not so that you can give your bodies into the slavery of obsession with sex.

### **Gospel: John 1: 43-51**

With this reading John brings to an end his introduction to the gospel, and again the point at issue is knowledge. Jesus shows extraordinary knowledge of Nathanael, which Nathanael cannot account for. Clearly he (Nathanael) is not content with Jesus' matter-of-fact *I saw you under the fig tree*, so we may infer that Jesus' words about Nathanael's guileless character arose from some other source.

Nathanael's contemptuous words about Nazareth may be an echo of contemporary attitudes in Jerusalem, where it was clearly believed that Nazareth had no part to play in Israel's historical "big picture".

The closing words of this passage look ahead to the great story that is about to unfold. It is almost as if Jesus is telling Nathanael: *You may have been impressed with what you have seen today. Just wait; there's so much more to come!*