

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: December and January/February Notes

December 2nd: Host Toyin, Lead Peta. Ecclesiasticus 42: 15-25, 43; 1-33: Praise of Creation: God's power. Creation: The wonders of the sky. Wonders beyond description. The glory of the Lord fills his creation. Not a word is hidden from him. (This is a challenging concept for parents not sure where the kids are, that God has 24 hour awareness of 8,259.423,618 individual human beings...to say nothing of sparrows.) "All things go in pairs"??? All things are made by the "word" of God: the familiar, and powerful, image of the creative power of the Word. The mystery: Not even the angels are in on the secret. Do we want revelation or mystery or both? In a pre-scientific age, Ben Sira seems to suggest we should be content not to know – don't ask too many questions! But maybe God gave us questioning minds. If we have stopped asking, we have stopped learning; if we have stopped learning, we have stopped living. BS and his generation knew only the then visible universe: our starting point is billions of years and billions of miles bigger.

The highly visible aspects of the natural world: sun, moon, stars, rainbows, storms, earthquakes, snow storms, frosts, fresh dew. A purpose in all things. It is interesting that we are now much better placed both to forecast and to explain these things and their origins; and we are to some extent better placed to protect ourselves against adverse effects – insulated flats, as against a tent. We are not much better placed to "control" them. Note the sea monsters – the sea was a scary place.

By his word, all things hold together. Our belief is in a Creator God who doesn't just create and move on; but, like BS, we have to wrestle with a world where God is in control but it often doesn't look like God is in control; and, unlike BS, we have to reckon with a long-drawn out creation process in which humanity is a (comparatively) recent arrival...as well as being a very very tiny part of the totality. We see much more of the whole than BS did; but we are still ignorant of a great deal. The human "masters of the universe" still wear L plates. (Black holes.....)

December 9th: Host Toyin. Lead Miranda. Ecclesiasticus 44: 1-23. We turn to the history of Israel as God's People: a very chequered history. The Bible is very honest about the short-comings. This is a great piece of poetry, and quite a variety of activity is celebrated. Kings, prophets, musicians. Names and records live on. This is probably the best known passage in Ecclesiasticus: Old Whitgiftians heard it read at every Founders Day Communion in the Whitgift Alms Houses. The text maybe recognises that not all people who deserve to be remembered are remembered. Out of interest, which people (and for what) do we remember historical figures? Alfred and cake burning; Nelson and kissing another male; Robert the Bruce and watching a spider...? We seem to remember the odd things more than the important things.

Adam left out...but maybe he was a type rather than a real person. Enoch is featured perhaps oddly, given that we know almost nothing about him ... other than that he went

alive to heaven – Genesis 5.24 - (a heaven in which the author did not believe!). Noah uniquely righteous... but the Bible story says he got drunk, and rather let the side down. Abraham faith and righteousness.. though he too sometimes got it wrong, e.g. pretending that his wife was his sister to protect himself. Note the reference to Israel possessing all the land from the Great River to the ends of the earth: still a significant claim in 2024. How do we rate Abraham's willingness to murder Isaac: obedience or stupidity? (This incident has been referenced in the Father and Son story of the Crucifixion.)

December 16th: Host Andy. Lead David. Ecclesiasticus 45: 1-26. Moses, Aaron, Phinehas. Moses and Aaron everyone knows about; Phinehas (Aaron's grandson)? Do please read Numbers 25 verses 12-13. But go back to the beginning of Numbers 25, and you see that Phinehas won fame by murdering to enforce racial/religious purity: sounds a bit dodgy to us. Moses is very highly praised – as enjoying the approval of all mankind [human kind], and equal in glory to the angels. Moses too had his short-comings: “Not me, please, Lord!”; and he started off murdering an Egyptian. Aaron gets far more space than Moses, much of it about his work clothes. The author had a thing about High Priests (and the Temple). Aaron had his faults too: remember the sacred cow which he created to please the discontented people. How you live as well as what you say gets you into the people to be remembered list. This text lines up King and High Priest, as co-stars. In Bible history, having a king was rather forced on God; and there was for a time a division over the priestly line. Note that priest and lawyer ran together at one stage in the High Priest role.

Korah, Dathan and Abiram get their everlasting memorial here, but as badies alongside the highly selective list of goodies. Anything (good!) you would like to be remembered for? Asked to name 6 Bible people, what would your list be?

January 6th: Ecclesiasticus 46: 1-20. Host Andy. Lead Toyin. Joshua (and Caleb), Judges, Samuel. We think of Joshua as a military leader much more than as a prophet. He is classed as a prophet. So hard to grasp Joshua and Caleb as the only two survivors of maybe 600,000. Joshua means God Saves. Joshua is associated with the extermination policy that seems to be featuring in some current Israeli thinking. Side by side living seems so obvious to us, but the contamination argument tended to prevail in official thinking. Caleb got Hebron.

Only 2 verses on the long (and often awful) period of the Judges. Message: reject idolatry, and never rebel against God. Gideon indulged in idolatry. Samson sort of rebelled, as well being a prat - particularly where women were concerned. These were days of tribal fighting – later subsumed in Israel versus Judah.

Samuel is given credit for establishing the monarchy. He was against having a King, and only co-operated (objections stated and warnings issued) when God said let them have their wish, and suffer for it. BS is not alone in writing down Saul, to talk up David. The winner writes the history. If Social Services had been around then, we would not have had Samuel: they would never have allowed Hannah to dump a small child on an old man living in a Temple. (An old man with two sons he over-indulged – a number of Bible stars were really pretty lousy parents.)

January 13th: Ecclesiasticus 47: 1-25: Host Andy. Lead Evan. David. Solomon. Division of the Kingdom. David the Chosen. “The Lord pardoned his sins.” Adultery and murder really do need a lot of pardoning; and over-indulging his son Absalom needs forgiveness big time too. We think of David as greatest King. If you read the full story, he spent a lot of time trying to be king, and a lot of time kinda wishing he wasn’t king. And he was a bit pushed around by his rival army commanders. On the positive side, his story is a unique blend of poet/musician and warrior. If we remember nothing else favourably from the Old Testament, we remember David’s Psalms. We also remember that David was remarkably good at owning up to his faults.

The Solomon section starts with a reminder of the weird combination of “wise man” and “sinner”. I treasure the small boy saying reflectively to his mother, “Mum, I don’t think Solomon was a very clever man!” I like the line, “How wise were you in your youth”. We are supposed to become wiser as we become older. He is condemned for “selling out to women”. Why blame the women – most of whom probably had little choice about their relationship with Solomon?

The split of the single Kingdom is blamed on Jeroboam, because he set up two rival worship centres to compete with Jerusalem; though it would be at least as just to blame Solomon’s idiot son Rehoboam for the separation of 10 of the 12 tribes. The author is dead set against idolatry. What are our idols?

January 20th: Ecclesiasticus 48: 1-16. Host Andy. Lead Andy. Elijah. Elisha. Punishment of the Northern Kingdom. The selection of prophets to focus on is interesting. We might have expected Isaiah and Jeremiah to be more prominent, both because of the Bible space they occupy, and because of their well deserved prominence in our lectionary. The author prefers deeds, especially those at the miracle end of the spectrum, to words; and Elijah and Elisha score here. (Jesus had to remind people to listen to the message rather than focus entirely on the signs.)

The Elisha reference is brief, and rather dominated by the odd little story of corpses being revived by touching Elisha's grave. Elijah, of course, like Enoch, was carried off alive. Gains we wonder where to if there is no heaven after death.

The Northern Kingdom is rather briefly written off; and Amos and Hosea get no mention. I'm never comfortable with generalisations about a people or a period. Historians tend to make the same mistake – because the truth is too complicated. Even when there is a lot of badness about, there are good people doing kind things. This is where God looking at the detail matters so much. Pundits, historians, philosophers, journalists, politicians, see things in generalised headlines. God notes old Mrs Brown not buying a bar of chocolate because she wants to give a small Christmas tip to the postman who brings her the occasional letter from the few friends.

January 27th: Ecclesiasticus 48:17-25, 49:1-16, 50:1-29: Host David, Lead Miranda.

Hezekiel. Josiah. (The Good Kings of Judah.) Destruction of Jerusalem. Ezekiel etc. Jerusalem rebuilt. Omissions. High Priest Simon. Prayer for the peace of Israel. Three nations to be detested. Postscript. Another reminder of over-simplified British history: good kings and bad kings. Isaiah dominates the Hezekiah section, including his long-term prophecies. No doubts here about there being only one Isaiah. Interesting issues about leaders relying on God or God-inspired people, or on their inner circle, or on popular opinion. The same challenges face modern leaders, whether democratically elected or otherwise. Balance between religious reform and social reform: does the latter guarantee the former? Balance between the right sorts of things happening in the Temple, and the right sorts of things happening in people's hearts and lives? Jeremiah gets a warm mention. Hosea to Malachi go un-named.

The post-Exile Jerusalem rebuilders are given due credit. As our Governments have discovered over the centuries, it is easier to build buildings than to build community. [How to re-build Gaza?] Enoch dominates even the footnote about top people not previously referenced. Again odd: we can see why Joseph mattered, but not why Enoch (if he ever existed) mattered.

The long section on High Priest Simon emphasises how much Jerusalem and the Temple mattered to many Jews, including the exiles. If Canterbury Cathedral was destroyed we would be sad, but not distraught. Maybe we have never been to a service there? Only the High Priest on the Day of Atonement in the inner sanctuary could use God's special name. We have children in the sanctuary. Mystery and Majesty, or simplicity and humility. Communion in sanctuary from Archbishop in full regalia is fine; but House Communion from someone in civies counts as much?

The detested nations section is prejudice at its worst: I can't travel through Penge without spitting! Puts Jesus and the Samaritan woman in perspective.

The odd personal postscript is very unusual in Bible terms. Big-headed, or just endearingly ambitious? It reminds me a little of Nehemiah: "Oh what a good boy am I!"

February 5th: Ecclesiasticus 51: 1-30: Host David. Lead Brian. Personal psalm of thanksgiving. Finally! The psalm seems to be a later addition by the author. It is very much in the tradition and style of the Psalms. Have we had a personal experience of God... and does this actually matter. I remember saying to Confirmation candidates that they might get a special feeling, but not to go looking for it. As far as I know, there has never been a repeat of the first Pentecost "gift of tongues"; and I don't think that even Pentecostalists (who rate feelings quite highly) claim to have experienced visible tongues of fire. I'm rather at the non-emotional end of the spectrum: a quiet smile in moments of extreme excitement.

Study wisdom. Seek wisdom. It is about a life-long journey, and maybe a beyond life journey; rather than about "Now I'm wise!" Travelling hopefully. I think too that this is about far more than self-improvement. I was talking this morning to a neighbour who is very good at being a neighbour. He said that the last time he went to a rather extended church service (a funeral), he found himself wondering whether he might not be more usefully employed cutting the widow's grass. A fair question?

Does Ben Sira successfully combine religious and secular morality. Believers will want to do church and to do private prayer and Bible study; and they may quite properly want to share the Good News – because if it has helped them, it may well help the person they are talking to. (And if it is the truth, you are justified in wanting to share it.) But in terms of interaction with individuals and groups, are religious and secular moralities much the same? Sometimes, with organised religions, it seems that religious morality falls below secular standards. The State treats the "drunk", the "junkie", the "pervert", as well as the "virtuous" person. You are not excluded from the doctor's waiting room because you are "one of them". Churches etc sometimes seem more selective?

Then there are tricky clashes between moral principles and moral behaviour. A woman has the right to do what she wants with her own body, but abortion on demand?

Where the Bible helps is in showing that there are moral principles, which matter for individuals and for society.....and which, in some cases change, over time; and that people who are in many ways good people sometimes do bad things. The Bible juggles with forgiveness and with retribution. Always, there is the reminder that God knows us better than we know ourselves (and better than the neighbours know us).....and (s)he is a God of Forgiveness as well as a God of Rightousness.