

2023-12-10 ... 6.30pm Evensong Sermon ... Canon William Price
1 Kings 22: 1 – 28; Romans 15: 4 - 13

The first, rather long, lesson this evening is a curious story from the first book of the Kings. (1 Kings chapter 22, verses 1-28) The kings of Israel and Judah were trying to decide whether to go to war with the King of Aram to recapture the town of Ramoth Gilead. The kings asked 400 prophets what they should do, and the prophets said in effect ‘Go for it’. But then the King of Judah, Jehoshaphat, asked if there was another prophet who could be consulted – as if the views of 400 were not enough – and the King of Israel mentioned a prophet called Micaiah, although he said that Micaiah never prophesied any good for him.

At first Micaiah went along with the 400 prophets and told the kings to go to war, but the King of Israel, Ahab, replied: **‘Not so fast. How many times have I told you to tell me the truth and nothing but the truth?’** Then Micaiah spoke about a vision which he’d had of God in heaven asking his angels how he could get King Ahab to go to war and be killed, and one spirit had said that he would get all the prophets to lie. So Micaiah said to King Ahab: **‘That’s what has happened. God filled the mouths of your puppet prophets with seductive lies’**. The kings had enough of Micaiah and took their armies to war. The King of Israel ordered Micaiah to be put in prison and fed on bread and water until the King returned. But the King of Israel never returned home. He was killed in the battle, although the King of Judah did reach home.

It’s interesting that in Micaiah’s vision God had a heavenly council and according to this story that false prophesies are not necessarily the result of a prophet’s intention to deceive, but may come from a power outside himself – even from God. The last is a possibility to which we as Christians could hardly assent. We cannot believe that God would entice Ahab to his doom and use the prophets for this purpose. But the problem of distinguishing between true and false prophecy was undoubtedly a serious one to the ancient Hebrews and in a sense it remains so. While no test for distinguishing a true prophesy from a false one is infallible, the best is the one suggested by this story – a false prophet usually tells his audience what they *want* to hear, like the 400 prophets, who were paid by the King as part of his court, while a true prophet tells them what they *ought* to hear. The true prophet, in other words, is one who is likely to make his audience uncomfortable.

This reading also reminds us that what we call the Holy Land has been throughout the centuries a land of warfare. The reading tonight actually begins with the words: **‘For three years Aram and Israel continued without war’**, indicating that three years without a war was unusual. I do not need this evening to speak of the terrible situation in the Holy Land at the present time. We need to pray for peace and for justice in that sad land, where neither side in the conflict seems to have any understanding of the other side’s motivation. The *‘little town of Bethlehem’* may be still this Christmas, but it is a stillness resulting from fear and terror.

The second lesson came from St Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome. (Romans, chapter 15, verses 4-13) When he wrote it he had not been to Rome, so the letter is different from those to the Christians in Corinth, where he had started the church. Paul was concerned about some versions of Christian teaching which he regarded as wrong and which were being taught in some places. So he wanted to warn the Roman Christians about these distorted versions, one teaching that to be a Christian one had to be a Jew, one teaching that we can earn salvation by our own behaviour (instead of realising that salvation is a pure gift), and one teaching that because we cannot earn salvation by our own behaviour we can do anything we want, leaving everything to God’s love.

Our second reading tonight seems to me to be about people whose faith is strong helping those whose faith is weak. Strong faith is for service, not for status, so we need to look after the good of people around us, always asking, as it were, **‘How can I help, as Jesus helped people?’** PTO

And a good way to know how to help is to be found in the Bible. The Bible was written a long time ago, but we must always remember that it was written for us. The collect of today (Advent II) in the Book of Common Prayer speaks so beautifully about the Bible. God wants his steady and constant calling and warm personal advice in the Bible to come to form our outlooks, keeping us alert for what God will do next. Paul prays that God will develop maturity in us so that we get along with each other as well as Jesus gets along with us all. And then Paul speaks of Christians being of one voice. One paraphrase puts it vividly: *'Then we'll be a choir – not our voices only, but our very lives singing in harmony in a stunning anthem to the God and Father of our Master Jesus'*.

In the light of this Paul urges us to welcome one another, as Jesus has welcomed us, welcomed us for the glory of God. And the welcome is to everyone of every race. In Paul's time this meant Jews and Gentiles (non Jews). And Paul goes on to quote several verses in the Old Testament which speak of Jews and Gentiles singing to God, rejoicing together, celebrating and praising God. Our Christian faith is for everyone.

The final verse in tonight's second lesson is a beautiful prayer of blessing, sometimes said in our services. This is one translation: **'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope'**. Hope, joy, and peace.

The accounts of the military activities of Hebrew kings and the vision of a Hebrew prophet in the first lesson may be of some historical interest to us, but it is the second lesson which speaks more vitally, at least to me. May our study of the Bible give us hope, a virtue so often in short supply these days in all sorts of ways, and from that hope may we find joy and peace. Treasure these lovely things in Advent as we wait and watch for the stupendous truth of Christmas, that God became one of us.

William Price