

## **Thought for the day: 6-12 September 2021**

### **by Rev. Bill Church**

#### **Monday 6<sup>th</sup>**

On (date redacted) I became (number redacted) years old.

Suffice it to say that I cannot console myself by repeating the mantra that 50 is the new 30, and my body reminds me of that from time to time.

So, I am having to think about what I must do less of; or what I must do more carefully; or what I must do more slowly; or what I must not do at all. And what I ought to start doing or resume doing.

Actually, those are all calculations which we ought to be doing the whole time, not just because some arbitrary date occurs.



Time is something the older you get the more (theoretically) you have. Time is also one of the resources which we ought to husband as much as money or talents.

Every day is an unrepeatabe offer.

## **Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup>**

These next three Thoughts are about the Apocrypha, a part of the Bible which is controversial because of differing views on its standing, if any, among Christian scripture; and more often it is just left out of Bibles.

People cannot even agree on its name: Apocrypha, Greek for hidden; Deutero-Canonical, implying it is properly part of the Bible but second rank; or Inter-testamental, because it was written between the Old and New Testaments.

The Anglican position, as summed up in the 39 Articles, is that it is read "for example of life and instruction of manners" but not to establish any doctrine (Article 6).

It is a mixed bag. Maccabees is a bloodthirsty and biased account of a successful guerrilla uprising; Ecclesiasticus (or Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach) is a long and thoughtful piece of advice and reflection; others are additional scraps of Old Testament books; etc.

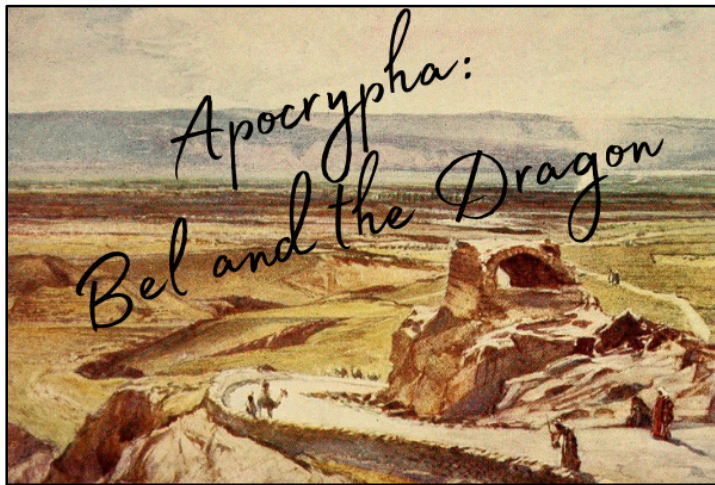
These three Thoughts dwell on storytelling books, all set in the period of exile. All are fun; none are profound; all show goodness triumphing. The first is:

### **Bel and the Dragon**

Daniel is the trusted friend of King Cyrus, who worships Bel, a Babylonian idol for whom prodigious amounts of food and

drink are daily provided and which, it seems, Bel daily devours. Daniel, as a good Jew and remembering Psalm 115, knows it must be a fraud and wagers his life that he can prove it. By what cunning device does he manage this? Read the book!

<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Apocrypha-Books/>



*IMAGE: The\_Holy\_Bible,\_containing\_the\_Old\_&\_New\_Testament\_&\_the\_Apocrypha.djvu: Massachusetts Bible Society derivative work: Theornamentalist, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons*

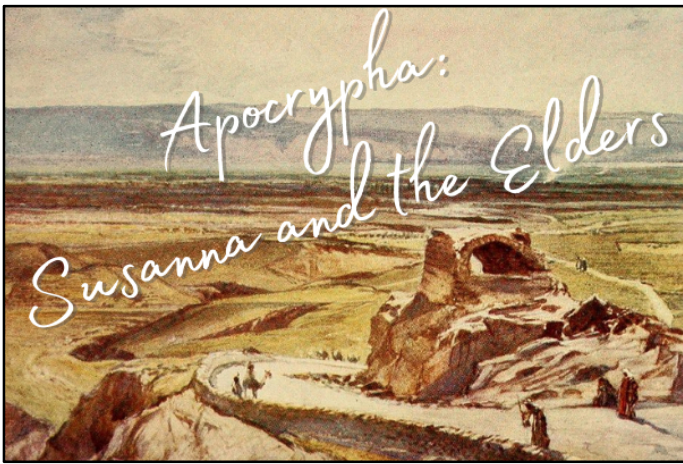
## **Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup>**

Our next book of the Apocrypha:

### **Susanna and the Elders**

Susanna is the virtuous, pious and beautiful wife of Joachim, a rich man and a leading member of the Jewish community in exile in Babylon.

Two recently appointed Elders of the community lust after Susanna. They corner her in the garden next to Joachim's house. They threaten that if she does not submit to their demands, they will denounce her. She refuses this sin against the Lord, and so they drag her before a hearing in Joachim's house the next day. They claim to have seen her in flagrante with a young man in the garden.



The assembly at once convicts her but as she is being led off to execution, Daniel hears her cry and is prompted by God to protest and demand a retrial. At the second hearing, Daniel shows that the Elders had given false witness and they, instead, are put to death.

How did Daniel do this? Read the book.

This episode establishes Daniel's reputation among his people – and down the ages. In the court scene of Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, Shylock flatters the disguised Portia; *"A Daniel come to judgment! Yea a Daniel! O wise young judge, how I do honour thee!"*

## **Thursday 9<sup>th</sup>**

Our next book from the Apocrypha:

### **Tobit**

This story is from the Assyrian exile. Tobit lived in Nineveh and had prospered but lost everything by defying a ban on giving fellow Jews a ritual burial. To add to his woes, he was blinded by bird droppings that fell into his eyes as he was asleep.

Remembering money he had lodged with a cousin in the land of the Medes, he sent his son Tobias to collect it, and appointed as Tobias' guide and minder a mysterious stranger calling himself Azarias.

They set off (with a dog!). Tobias catches an enormous fish in the Tigris and Azarias insists he keep the gall, heart and liver (ugh!).

In Media, Tobias falls in love with the brave and beautiful Sarah. The only drawback is that she has already been married seven times and each time the bridegroom has been killed on the wedding night by the demon Asmodeus.

Undeterred, Tobias marries Sarah and, following Azarias' advice, puts Asmodeus to flight. Azarias collects the money and they all return to Tobit's house.

Tobias cures Tobit's blindness by applying the fish gall.

They all sing hymns of praise to God; Tobit dies a happy man; Tobias and Sarah live happily ever after.



What was Azarias' real name? How did Tobias defeat Asmodeus?

Read the book.

## **Friday 10<sup>th</sup>**

The Russian writer Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) is best known for his long novels *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* which tell the stories of Russian aristocrats. He also wrote short stories creating or retelling folk stories of peasant life, perhaps with a rose-tinted view of an era when there was (until 1861) still serfdom but in admiration of an unlettered faith. The next three Thoughts are drawn from those tales.

### **The trip to Jerusalem (no, not the pub in Nottingham)**

Two old friends, Efim, a rich and anxious man, and Elisha, not so rich but more carefree, decided to fulfil their lifelong desire to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. They set off one spring on foot. After many miles, Elisha stopped to rest but

Efim carried on. The harvest there had failed and Elisha stayed behind to help a starving family; not something he planned – it just happened. He spent time and most of his money setting the family up for the new season. After many days he set off again but then realised he could never reach Jerusalem in time, and went home without ever leaving Russia.

Meanwhile, Efim got to the Holy Land, saw all the sights, bought himself a shroud, worried in case his purse was stolen and worshipped three days running at the Holy Sepulchre. Each day, he was sure he saw Elisha in the holiest place but could not find him afterwards. Efim assumed he must somehow have overtaken him.



Efim travelled back and on the way heard from the family whom Elisha had saved all about what he had done for them. Efim reached home at last and learned that Elisha had never left Russia. Efim realised that God had accepted Elisha's pilgrimage even though he had never completed it.

*Go and do thou likewise.* (Luke 10. 37)

**Saturday 11<sup>th</sup>**

**The three hermits. Another tale from Tolstoy.**

A Bishop was sailing in the White Sea to visit a great monastery when he heard tell of a nearby island where three old men lived a holy and ascetic life as hermits.

Intrigued, he asked the ship to stop while he met them. When he approached them and asked them in what way they were serving God, they were silent for a long time, then answered: "We do not know how to serve God."



"But how do you pray to God?", the Bishop asked.

"We pray in this way: 'Three are you and three are we, have mercy upon us'."

Somewhat shocked, the Bishop set about teaching them to say the Lord's Prayer. This was hard for the hermits but by the end of the day, they could recite it.

Satisfied, the Bishop boarded the ship and sailed off, hearing the three loudly repeating the Lord's Prayer. He sat in the stern while the other passengers slept.



Late in the night, he saw the three hermits gliding over the water. When they overtook the boat, they said together: "We have forgotten your teaching, servant of God. Teach us again."

The Bishop bowed before them and said: "Your own prayer will reach the Lord, men of God. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinners."

The hermits went back across the sea and a light shone where they had been.

*Jesus said: "Father, I thank you because you have shown to the unlearned what you have hidden from the wise and learned." (Matthew 11. 25)*

*IMAGE: Mikhail Vasil'evich Nesterov (1862-1942) Study for 'The Three Hermits' signed in Cyrillic and dated 'Mikh Nesterov 1889-1917' (lower left) watercolour and bodycolour on paper laid on board*

## **Sunday 12th**

### **The kingdom of Ivan the Fool. Another tale from Tolstoy**

There was a family of three brothers and a sister. Simon and Taras were bright and ambitious. Ivan was simple and was called a Fool. Martha was deaf and dumb.

The Devil decided to tempt them and ruin them and sent three of his imps to do the job. The first imp successfully tempted Simon with military power.

The second imp successfully tempted Taras with wealth. The third imp totally failed to make Ivan angry or stop his farm work.

Simon was ruined by a disastrous battle; Taras was ruined by inflation. Both returned to live as ungrateful guests with Ivan.

Ivan was instrumental in healing the king's daughter, was given her hand in marriage and inherited the kingdom.

The only rules in the Kingdom of Ivan the Fool were based on Luke 6: "Give to everyone who asks you; if anyone takes what is yours, do not demand it back."

The Devil was furious.

At last he decided to tempt them with gold. He set up as a merchant and paid in gold for food and work on a grand house. But as the people lived on their produce and by neighbourly barter, as soon as they had enough gold for necklaces and children's playthings, they would no longer work or sell the Devil food.

He was starving, so he tried to get a meal at Ivan's house. But Martha examined his hands. As they were not hard from work, she told him to sit outside to eat the leftovers.

The indignant Devil explained that clever people work with their heads, not their hands.

The people were fascinated and set the Devil on top of a tower to teach them how you work with your head. After much fruitless talking, the Devil became faint with hunger and slipped down the stairs of the tower, bumping his head as he fell.



"So now he really is working with his head" they said.

The Devil disappeared through a hole in the ground and the Kingdom of Ivan the Fool was left in peace.

*(abridged – the full tale would make a good pantomime!)*

IMAGE: Ivan the Fool, Michael Sevier (illustrator), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons