



ST JAMES AYR – SUNDAY REFLECTIONS – 25 April 2021



Introduction

Dear all,

Welcome to this week's Sunday Reflection. I am delighted that you join us in this way.

Due to current guidance and can now encourage you to distribute these devotions to your friends and neighbours, please do so if you can do it safely.

Intimations:

Please remember or video and audio service

North Ayr Prayer meetings have started again on zoom (2nd Monday a month)

Junior Church have been honoured as "community heroes" in UK-wide event

Please join me now for prayer and reflection

The psalmist says:

God is my refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. (Ps 46,1)

Prayer

Loving God,

We come to you today bringing our strength and courage that comes from faith, we bring to you our brokenness and our doubts, because all of this makes who we are and we know that you love each of us the way we are, that you have created us in your image.

Gracious God,

We give you thanks that you walk with us through the valley of shadows as well as through times and places of light. We thank you that you are our hope and our salvation, that you are our comfort, we thank you that we will live in your house forever.

We give you thanks for your son Jesus Christ who came to us as a helpless babe, as one of us, to share our journey of life. We thank you that he came to us to preach and to teach, and to show us your love, through his life, through his death, through his resurrection.

We give you thanks for your Holy Spirit, through which you give us the hope and the strength to follow your son, to spread your good news in our community, through which you give us the hope and the strength to do what is right in your eyes.

Loving God,

We know that it is not always easy to keep up our hope and our strength for you, when hope and strength is needed the most. We are tired and exhausted and sometimes we do not know how to go on. Grant us your strength, we pray

We know that it can be difficult to walk the path of righteousness, your path, the path your son has walked before us, often we stray, give in to the ways of the world, to judgement and prejudice. Grant us your compassion we pray.

Gracious Lord,

We know we have failed you and each other time and again, but we also know that you have forgiven us through your son's death on the cross, and in this assurance, we pray:

Lord's Prayer

Our father, who art in heaven,

Hallowed be Thy name,

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done on earth,

As it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread

and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

and lead us not into temptation

but deliver us from evil

for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. AMEN

READINGS

Lesson 1: Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³ he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.⁶ Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Lesson 2: Acts 9, 23-31

After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, ²⁴ but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. ²⁵ But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. ²⁶ When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So, Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ c. ³⁰ When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. ³¹ Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Reflection

Everybody speaks about George Floyd these days, after a trial that grabbed the world's media attention. America is going through a change in society that has not been seen since Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks in the 1960s and it seems that the whole world was looking on, waiting with bated breath for the jury's verdict. It seems that everybody has an opinion on the new movement that rose up after the untimely death of a black man whom nobody had ever heard about before and even the General Assembly last year declared categorically that Black Lives Matter. That does of course not mean that other lives don't matter, rather it highlights the fact that over 50 years after Martin Luther King's violent death for some black lives still matter less than any other and that of course is against God's commandments as well as against humanity. This movement highlights the diversity of American society, of our society, of the world and the world of the apostles was no less diverse as today's reading shows.

The book of Acts is one of the lesser-known books in the Bible and that is understandable, given that it does no longer deal with Jesus himself, but with his followers, the first apostles, the lives of the first Christian congregations. I do not think that this is necessarily a bad thing. I personally can identify with the protagonists and heroes of the story, sometimes more so than with the gospels themselves, because, after all, are we not all Jesus' followers? So, we have something in common with the first apostles, something that maybe transcends time and space: we all have the same faith in Jesus as our saviour, regardless of our background. And that, I think, links the present to the past, even if we do not understand everything, even, if like in today's reading we will have to read between the lines to make sense of the story, even if circumstances and situations are not as obvious to us as it was to the readers of the time.

Today's reading is a prime example of a passage that requires us to read between the lines. It is not hard to understand, why some of the Christians Paul encountered did not trust him, were afraid of him, as today's reading states: "When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple". Paul did, after all persecute them rather ruthlessly, was responsible for many of their brother's and sister's imprisonment and death. To trust him implicitly, to protect him from being persecuted himself, is a big ask. Paul and the first Christian communities, they had history. One would expect it to take time to build a positive, trusting relationship after all that had been. In a way, I would argue, it is more surprising that Paul had friends and followers at all among Christians, people who were willing to risk their neck for him, who "took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall", who helped him escape. It is proof that the first Christians were not as homogeneous a group as we often think, that they consisted of individuals who did not always agree, who had strong arguments and emotions for and against Paul, who argued and disagreed just as much as a modern congregation, Kirk Session or presbytery – and maybe with more at stake. It is proof that the first Christians had their differences, had to find a way to live together, just as we today must find ways to live together and that these ways were not always straightforward. It would take time and patience to reconcile the different parties and factions – and sometimes it may seem as if this had not been achieved to this day. Conflict and disagreement, it seems, is a natural part of life, even among Christians and so I believe, it is ok to own that, to accept that, as long as we do not give up on finding ways of living together, to accept each other, no matter who we are and where we come from, just like in time the first Christians learned to accept Paul.

It is on the other hand also pretty obvious, why Saul – or Paul – is being persecuted, why some people, people he used to belong to want him dead: He had broken ranks, changed to the other side, they

may well have felt betrayed. After all, they had no reason to believe that Paul would not support their cause – and now this: Paul has sided with those, who they had fought against together – side by side. I can imagine the anger and pain that caused. But who exactly are those who persecute Paul, and why are they so obsessed with him: “Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him”. There are the Jews of Jerusalem, those who are concerned with the purity of their faith, to whom the first Christians were a suspicious and dangerous sect. And we do have to understand their perspective: These people, were not evil, murdering monsters, they were pious people, who sought to defend what they believed in: They saw themselves as God’s chosen people, the ones he liberated from the shackles of Egypt. They saw it as their duty to defend their faith and the faith of their ancestors. But they are not the only ones who are after Paul: “He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him” we read. Hellenistic Jews were of Greek origin, proselytes, converted to a new faith and their descendants. People who will in all probability have already incorporated cultural, philosophical and traditional elements that were alien to those who counted themselves as descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Reading between the lines there were already cultural shifts in society: Judaism became influenced by Hellenism – meaning Greek culture – and they in turn embraced Judaism. It does not look like it just now, when both are after Paul’s blood, but this is exactly the rich, multicultural background, against which Christianity – just a few years on, could thrive, against which Paul – or possibly one of his followers - could say: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3, 28), What is a threatening situation in this passage, will become a chance for Christians, a chance to thrive in a society in which people – despite obvious differences – are beginning to accept each other. It may seem surprising at first that this passage, that is so full of conflict and strife, ends on such a conciliatory and peaceful note, that the apostle is finally able to report: “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and

Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.” It is not only because one bone of contention, Paul, is removed to Tarsus. I firmly believe it is also because Christians have learned to live together, have learned to tolerate each other in a society, against a cultural backdrop, in which tolerance, acceptance and diversity became more and more important. And so Christians for a time at least could focus on what unites them, rather on what divides them, could focus on the trust in God, that the psalmist of our Old testament reading expresses so eloquently when he says” Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”, on the comfort and confidence this trust brings as the psalmist proclaims: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” and most importantly on the faith in Jesus Christ as our saviour. AMEN

Prayer of Intercession

Loving God

We give you thanks that you are our hope and our strength, that your rod will comfort us, we thank you that you take care of us throughout our lives and lead us to green pastures and in gratitude for what you have given, we pray for those who have lost hope.

We will always pray for everyone who is affected by threat and violence, by conflict and terror, by fear for their safety and the safety of those who they love and today we pray especially for the people in the Ukraine, who live in fear of what is and what may come.

Lord, have mercy

We will always pray for all who are suffering under the strain of the coronavirus pandemic, for countries like France and Spain where cases

are rising and people live in fear once more, are isolated in their most difficult hours once more.

Lord, have mercy

We will continue to pray for all who are hungry and thirsty in this world, for those who have lost their job due to the pandemic or for any other reason, for those who cannot provide for themselves and for their children, depend on the compassion of others.

Lord, have mercy

We will never stop praying for everyone in our communities and in our congregations, for those who are vulnerable and frail, for those who are bereaved, and for those who are strong and have the potential to do good in their neighbourhood.

Lord, have mercy.

For all this we pray in Jesus' name. AMEN

Benediction

And the God who is our strength guard you and guide you in this coming week. And the almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forevermore. AMEN