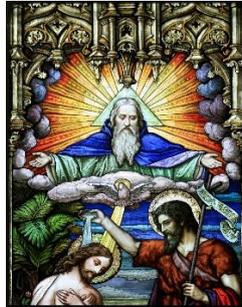




ST JAMES AYR – SUNDAY REFLECTIONS – 2 May 2021



Introduction

Dear all,

A warm welcome to this Sunday Reflection. May the Lord bless you and keep you.

As guidance has changed, we can encourage you to distribute these devotions to your friends and neighbours, please do so if it is safe for you and others.

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

I invite you to join me for prayer and reflection

The psalmist says:

Let all who take refuge in you be glad, let them ever sing for joy. (Ps 5,11)

Prayer

Loving God,

We come to you today with praise and rejoicing because you are our God, because you have saved us and delivered us through your son Jesus Christ, we come to you with thanksgiving, because you have washed away our sins.

Gracious God,

We give you thanks for your psalmists and your prophets who teach us how to pray and to praise, who teach us how to listen to your word and to follow you through their example and through their words, who lead us on the path of righteousness

We give you thanks for your son Jesus Christ who taught us to love you above all else and our neighbours as ourselves, who taught us how to be close to you, to follow you and to call you father, who taught us about your kingdom in heaven

We give you thanks for your Holy Spirit, which taught us to follow you and your son, taught us to follow our hearts in trust and in faith, as the first apostles did when they ventured into the unknown to spread the gospel in your name, who taught us to be courageous and strong

Loving God,

We know that it is not always easy to take your teachings, your son's teachings to heart and to live by them, to live in love and in faith, to spread your word with courage and hope. Help us to live by your word, we pray.

We know that it can be hard to follow your son, to do the right thing by you and by our neighbour, to love each other as you loved us, to show compassion where there is hatred, forgiveness where there is strife. Help us to follow you, we pray.

Gracious Lord,

We know we have failed you in the past and will fail you in the future, but we also know that you have already forgiven us through your grace and through your son's sacrifice and in this trust, we pray to you as Jesus has taught us to 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 22, 22-29

I will declare your name to my people in the assembly I will praise you. You who fear the LORD, praise him, all you descendants of Jacob, honour him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel, for he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help. From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly before those who fear you^[f] I will fulfil my vows. The poor will eat and be satisfied; those who seek the LORD will praise him— may your hearts live forever! All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations. All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before him— those who cannot keep themselves alive.

Lesson 2: Acts 8, 26-39

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So, he started out, and on his way, he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So, he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.” The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

Reflection

Sometimes it seems to me that nothing ever changes in life. (At other times it feels that changes happen with frightening speed). When I was at university, longer ago than I care to remember, students and lecturers alike were put into three categories: “liberal”, “evangelical” and “middle of the road”. I personally question the sense of categorizing students, future ministers in this way, but the categories exist to this day. At our university, the somewhat unfair prejudice was that evangelical students were intellectually less astute, less intelligent than the rest of us. And while I do not fit in the category of evangelical any more than in the category of liberal, while I would prefer to abolish such categories altogether and let people be people and ministers be ministers without any pre-judgement, I have always thought that criticism a bit harsh. One of my closest friends at university, who would describe himself as “evangelical” once said to me: “you do not have to hang your brain on a cloak hook, when you enter a church”. And he was right. Our faith is a faith for intelligent people, a faith that requires you to think. At the very least (and this might be taken for granted in the 21st century but let us remember that it was not a given in the past), a religion of the word, requires the ability to read. It also invites us to think, to question.

I love today’s gospel story. It is a story of hope and new beginnings, it is a story of rejoicing, a positive and optimistic story and I should think in this day and age we can do with that. It is also a story of deep reflection, discussion and thoughtfulness, and such a story is a summary of what I personally believe about our faith.

The Ethiopian official of our reading, for the apostle Philip a chance encounter on the road to Gaza, has come down all the way from Southern Africa to the holy city of Jerusalem to worship. He must therefore already be of the Jewish faith, the faith of our brothers and sisters, the faith of our ancestors and it is only logical that he studies the book of Isaiah, the prophet who is also familiar to us, to our traditions and worship. Although from a faraway country - and I can

only imagine, how long he travelled without the benefit of planes and cars - He is already connected to us, to our faith. He seems to be an intelligent man, as well as powerful and rich, the chancellor of the exchequer – in modern terms – to the Queen of Ethiopia. He is also clearly a man of faith, studying scripture on his way. When Philip addresses the man, he finds someone who is already open to the word of God, a man who wants to learn more, find out more about his faith, about what he is reading. For Philip it is an ideal opportunity for mission, for spreading God's word: "This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus" we read. The Ethiopian man does not take his faith for granted, does not follow blindly. He asks questions and he wants to learn, and Philip is only too willing to explain, that, after all, is his job as apostle. This too is ideal ground for a growing faith. Learning and questioning is not only allowed, it is essential to developing a mature and settled faith. The Scottish reformers knew that when they began to educate the country, when they insisted on a school in every village. Learning and studying shows commitment and interest and the questions that come from these studies, show that a person really wants to engage with what they are reading. Learning and studying has always been part of our Christian faith, and it is important, too. It is important because we are not called to follow blindly what any person of authority says to us in our church, we are called to check it out ourselves, to see for ourselves, to read for ourselves. And where a person in our presbytery, in our church, where a minister is wrong, it is ok to challenge them, to question them. Because in the end of the day, the Head of our church, the Church of Scotland, is Jesus Christ, and nobody else, even if persons in authority can forget that at times. And if we want to do that, we need to know our onions, need to know

what we are talking about, in order to do that we need to study, to question, to learn, all our lives – and I for one believe that this is not a chore, it is a joy. But it is not only permissible and part and parcel of our faith to question authority, the powers that are just now in our church – and in any government for that matter – it is also part and parcel of our faith to question God: The first verse of the psalm that is prescribed for our scripture reading, psalm 22, echoes the words Jesus said on the cross: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. And I would argue that that is the ultimate question you can ask. Before the praise that the psalmist sings in our passage, before he can say “I will declare your name to my people in the assembly I will praise you”, comes a question, and maybe that is a question that resonates with us today: “why have you forsaken us, why do you let us suffer? Why is the world the way it is”? These are legitimate questions, they are asked in the Bible all the time, and that is why we can ask them, too. Because only when we ask, we can find the answer, only when we ask, we can trust, only when we ask, we can say with the psalmist: “those who seek the LORD will praise him— may your hearts live forever! All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations”.

Back to our New Testament story, questions and learning is not the only thing that defines the Ethiopian official we encounter in today’s reading. He is also willing to trust, implicitly, to take a risk. Once convinced, he does not hesitate to take on the new faith, to embrace Jesus Christ as his Lord: “As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. “ That is quite literally a leap of faith. And it is this leap of faith that is the most satisfying, that gives him hope and joy, that changes his life. Learning, questioning, is important to him, and so it should be, but even more important is his faith. The Ethiopian official does not follow blindly, but follow he does. AMEN

Prayer of Intercession

Loving God

We give you thanks for the gift of faith that gives us strength to go through the challenges of these times, to go through the challenges of today, we give you thanks for the gift of hope, that lets us cope with all that is difficult for us, and in gratitude for what you have given to us we offer our prayer for those who do not have what we have.

We will continue to pray for all who are afflicted by war, terror and conflict all over the world, for the widows and the orphans, for the wounded and the bereaved, for the displaced in Syria, in Ethiopia and everywhere where terror reigns. Grant your courage, Lord

Lord, have mercy

We will always pray for all who are in the cruel grip of the coronavirus pandemic and today we pray especially for the people of India, where hospitals are overwhelmed and families distressed, where suffering is unimaginable. Grant your comfort, Lord.

Lord, have mercy

We will continue to pray for all who suffer injustice and inequality in this world, who work for our luxury, for coffee and chocolate and have barely enough to eat and clothe themselves, where children work to support their families. Grant your justice, Lord.

Lord, have mercy

We will continue to pray for everyone in our communities and congregations, for the ill and frail at home or in hospitals, for the bereaved, for the isolated and the lonely, for all who care for someone they love. Grant your compassion, Lord

Lord, have mercy.

For all this we pray in Jesus' name. AMEN

Benediction

And the God of hope 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