



ST JAMES AYR – SUNDAY REFLECTIONS – 21 March 2021



## Introduction

Dear all,

Welcome to our Sunday Reflection one week after Easter. God bless you all in this coming week.

We can now encourage you again to distribute these devotions through your friends' letterboxes, so if you can do so safely, please do.

### Intimations:

Please remember or video and audio service

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

Please join me now in prayer and reflection

The psalmist says:

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good his love endures forever.

(Ps 118,1)

## Prayer

Loving God,

We come to you on this Sunday morning with our very own thoughts and prayers, with our petitions and thanksgiving, knowing that you hear each of us, listen to us know us by our names, knowing that each of us is precious to you, is saved through your son.

Gracious God,

We give you thanks for the prophets and the psalmists who share their faith and their trust in you over thousands of years, who build a bridge between you and us, show us how to pray to you, how to trust in you, how to believe, we thank you for our faith.

We give you thanks for your son Jesus Christ whose death and resurrection connect us to you in this life and the next, whose death and resurrection have washed away our sins and gave us new life in you, we thank you for our lives.

We give you thanks for the gift of your Holy Spirit, that makes us bold and courageous for your names' sake, that makes us witnesses to your son's death and resurrection, makes us speak out for him and for you, we thank you for our courage.

Loving God,

We know that it is not always easy to be bold for you, to be strong in your name, when we are disheartened and afraid, when we do not know what the future will bring for ourselves and for your church, help us to be your witnesses, we pray.

We know that it is not always easy to live in you, to connect to you, when we live in a world full of worry and darkness, when we live in a world full of fear, when we want to cry like Jesus did: "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me", help us find our faith, we pray

Gracious Lord,

We know we have failed you again and again, but we also know that you have forgiven us through your son's sacrifice, and in this assurance, we pray 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 150***

Praise the Lord.<sup>[a]</sup> Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens.

<sup>2</sup> Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.

<sup>3</sup> Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre,

<sup>4</sup> praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe,

<sup>5</sup> praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. <sup>6</sup> Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.

### **Lesson: Acts 5, 27-32**

<sup>27</sup> The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. <sup>28</sup> “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.” <sup>29</sup> Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings!” <sup>30</sup> The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. <sup>32</sup> We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

## Reflection

Like many of you, I would guess, I have taken to more reading again during lockdown and I have rediscovered the charming Anne of Green Gables series of my youth, including those books that were published posthumously and not available when I was young. I dived into the picturesque and romantic world of Avonlea, the cherry tree in front of a gable window, the lake of shining water, the haunted wood and the village school. I followed the red-haired orphan girl from her arrival at the Cuthberts' house into adulthood. I was again completely charmed by the enchanted life on Prince Edward Island in Canada. Until I made my research, until I found that life on that island had its cracks, that history – and maybe this is not unexpected - is not wholly compatible with the lovely pages of this book. Prince Edward Island was the scene of fierce battles between British and French colonists, ending in a cruel expulsion of the defeated French, it was nearly bankrupt at one point due to complicated landownership rules and most disturbingly, authorities and churches took children away from First Nation, Mi'kmaq families to bring them up in so called residential schools, to assimilate them into British-Canadian society. Many children died due to poor hygiene and care, many communities were disrupted, many students were traumatised, this was not the most glorious chapter in church history, and my rose-tinted view of Avonlea and Prince Edward Island, the permanent festival mood of those lovely books received a rather harsh reality check.

Easter was a festival of joy, of renewal and new life, Easter was the festival of resurrection and that continues into our lives as Christians, that promise made by God himself through his son, will never leave us. But now reality sets in and the work begins, now the new challenges begin and so our lectionary, the prescribed reading for this Sunday quite rightly turns to the Acts of the Apostles. Written – judging by all we know today – by Luke, the same man whose gospel has so far accompanied us this year up to the point of Jesus' death and

resurrection, our readings turn now to the lives of the apostles, the first missionary Christians after Jesus' death, our readings now turn to the graft, the hard work, they turn from the festival and celebrations to everyday life. And everyday life does not start promising for the first apostles as they try to spread the good news of God and Christ. The opening scene of today's reading finds them in court, in front of the Sanhedrin: "The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. <sup>28</sup> "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood", we read. The apostles' situation is precarious: they have broken a strict court order, are repeat offenders, they have sought trouble, with the powerful and influential of their time, and they cannot possibly know how that ends, for all they know it might not end well. All the same they stick to their guns; they repeat again the accusation they have made before. They do not back down in the face of challenge and danger: "Peter and the other apostles replied (to them): "We must obey God rather than human beings! <sup>30</sup> The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross." They do not mince their words, they say it how it is and that takes courage, especially in court, especially threatened with punishment, imprisonment, maybe even death, especially when their fate is uncertain. We, on the other hand, are lucky that way: Today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are no longer persecuted for our faith – although it is worth remembering that Christians in other parts of the world are less fortunate, are still persecuted and imprisoned – here in Western Europe we are free to pursue our faith unhindered and unthreatened, in fact, for centuries we belonged to the privileged majority faith that built their churches and rang their bells proudly, the Church of Scotland sees itself as a National Church to this day. Our situation is very different from that of the apostles, and therefore our responsibilities are different. From a perspective of privilege and unquestioned prevalence we have the responsibility not to turn into the Sanhedrin, the judges of the apostles, we have the

responsibility not to judge, so we are not judged, not to persecute and discriminate against those of different nations, of different skin colour, of different faiths and beliefs, just because they are in the minority. And where Christians today and in history were guilty of that, where they enslaved and subdued those of different faiths and cultures, where they took their land, their possessions, their children we must remember that and repent of that. Because our beginnings as Christians, the experiences of the first apostles, the first believers' experiences were not experiences of privilege, they were minority experiences, persecuted for their faith. The first Christians, or many of them were slaves, minorities, foreigners, they lived on the edges of the Roman empire in Palestine or Asia Minor, most of them were not even Roman citizens, and neither was Jesus: no Roman citizen could be sentenced to die on the cross. And even in their original context, the context of Judaism in Palestine, Christians were a fringe movement, eccentric, if they were lucky, dangerous, if they were not so lucky. The first apostles were insignificant at best, persecuted and killed at worst. It would take almost another 300 years until the first Roman emperor became a Christian, until they were at least universally tolerated within the Roman empire. It is a history, I believe we cannot and should not forget in our privileged position today. It is part of our identity as Christians, that our spiritual ancestors once were persecuted for their faith, were discriminated against, were foreigners and slaves, disregarded and disrespected. The Old Testament, the scripture Jesus and his apostles believed in says repeatedly: "Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt." And the first apostles knew how it felt to be strangers, too, knew how it felt to be oppressed and, as in our reading today, knew how it felt to be unfairly persecuted. That influenced their attitude towards foreigners, towards slaves, towards the poor, because they knew how it is. It should influence our attitude towards the poor, towards foreigners, towards the oppressed and marginalised in our society, because we were told in the Bible, in today's reading how it is. We are told a tale

of suffering and oppression, we are also told a tale of great courage and optimism, of people who in the face of danger bear witness in word and deed, who say to their prosecutor's face: "We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." And if they can do it, in the face of danger and death, maybe we – from a place of privilege - can do it, too, can confess Jesus as our Lord in word and in deed. It takes courage to be sure, but not as much courage, as it took the first apostles. And witness is not always fraught with danger and daring, it is not always solemn and serious, witness can be joyful and happy as the psalm of today's reading shows us. It can be uplifting and optimistic, it can be filled with song: "Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens", the psalmist rejoices, and: Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre,<sup>4</sup> praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe,<sup>5</sup> praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals." And so, let us do the same as the psalmist, let us do the same as the apostles, let us bear witness, in word and in deed, in praise and in responsibility, in joy and in danger. AMEN

### **Prayer of Intercession**

Loving God

In this time of hope and renewal we give you thanks for the hope on our horizon, for families who can safely meet again, for our ability to meet again in your house for worship and prayer, for the hope that freedom and normality are near and ingratitude for all this we pray for all who find it hard to hope.

We will always pray for all who live in regions of war and terror, of threat and instability and we think especially today of the people in Ukraine, who live with terror, violence and threat each day, we worry about their future. Grant them your peace, we pray

Lord, have mercy

We will continue to pray for all who are still suffering under the threat of a global pandemic, for all who have lost someone they love, for all who fight for their lives frightened and alone, for doctors and nurses who are exhausted and overworked, here and around the globe. Grant them your hope, we pray

Lord, have mercy

We pray for all who work for peace and justice, all over the world, for all who remind the powerful that you are a God who loves peace among the nations, for all who remind the rich that you demand justice for the poor. Grant them your courage, we pray

Lord, have mercy

We will always remember in our prayer those in our communities and in our congregations, who are lonely and bereaved, for all who are ill and frail at home, in care homes or in hospitals, for all who care for someone they love. Surround them with your love, we pray

Lord, have mercy.

For all this we pray in Jesus' name. AMEN

### **Benediction**

And the God of power and might 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