



ST JAMES AYR – SUNDAY REFLECTIONS – 4 October 2020



Introduction

Dear all,

Welcome to our Sunday Reflections on this second Sunday in October. I wish you God's blessing for this week.

Please share these reflections with anyone who might enjoy them, if it is safe for you to do so and please spread the word of our online and telephone services

I would like to invite you now to our weekly prayer and reflection

The apostle Paul says:

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them

Prayer

Loving God,

We come to you today to worship and give you praise, to acknowledge that you reign over our lives, to pledge our hearts and soul to you as your disciples and to follow you and your son towards the kingdom of heaven and we ask that you will give us strength to keep to your path in times of sorrow and in times of joy,

Gracious God,

We give you thanks for the guidance of your word, which leads us down a path of righteousness and justice towards a life, towards a world where your kingdom truly comes here on earth s it is in heaven, where a life of peace and justice, a life of love towards you and towards each other is possible, becomes our vision.

We give you thanks for your son Jesus Christ who through his teachings and his example showed us the way to you, a way of love and justice and peace, who showed us the way and the truth of your love, who showed us that it is possible to love each other, showed us that it is possible to love the unlovable, the sinners and the tax collectors.

We give you thanks for your Holy spirit, giving us the strength, the hope and the trust to live according to your word, to live in the certainty that your kingdom will come to us and that we can be a part of it, spreading your love, spreading your word in what we say and in what we do, in our neighbourhood and in the wider world

Gracious Father,

We know that it can be hard to keep up the hope in you when we see so much suffering and so much fear around us, when the hope that we can go back to the live we knew and loved is constantly crushed, when we feel helpless and adrift as individuals and as society, help us to hope, we pray.

We know it can be hard to love each other as we love ourselves, when fear gets in the way of love and compassion, when worry gets in the way of trust in you and in each other,, when pain gets in the way of hope, help us to love, we pray.

Loving Father

We know we have sinned against you and against each other, but we also know that you have forgiven us and have sent your son for our redemption and in this knowledge we bring before you what moves our heart. In Jesus name AMEN

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: Exodus 17, 1-7

The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ²So they quarrelled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?" ³But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" ⁴Then Moses cried out to the Lord, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵The Lord answered Moses, "Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. ⁶I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So, Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷And he called the place Massah^[a] and Meribah^[b] because the Israelites quarrelled and because they tested the Lord saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Lesson 2: Matthew 21, 23-3

²³ Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" ²⁴ Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁵ John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' ²⁶ But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁸ "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'²⁹ "'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. ³¹ "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you; the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.

Reflection

Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Everybody has to learn painful lessons about themselves, about their weaknesses in the course of their lives, so they can understand and accept themselves and if we are very lucky, we can turn our weaknesses into strengths. I for one learned the hard way what my weaknesses are on the long and winding road that is my life. And the one I consider one of my worst is that I don't suffer fools gladly, at least not if those fools happened to be my boss or my supervisor and I have been in quite a bit of trouble during my life for telling them exactly what I thought – and you may say with some justification, that that has not always been the smartest move. I know that, I just can't help myself. If somebody expects me to accept and respect their authority, I expect three things in return: that they are fair, that they are honest when they don't have the solution to a problem and that they are competent.

Over the years I learned to accept that this weakness in me is also a strength. I am not a yes sayer, I am not a servile apple polisher, I am in no danger of beating about the bush when something is important to me, when I think someone is in the wrong, no matter who he or she is – even if it was the emperor of China, as we say in my country. If somebody in authority wants my respect, they need to earn it. To state the obvious: That is not a quality that keeps you out of trouble or guarantees a quiet life. It does, however, give you self-respect, and occasionally it allows you to do the right thing, no matter what the cost. And in my book that is a good thing as it is a good thing to be a little choosy about who we accept as our authority, and as Christians our highest authority, our loyalty and allegiance should be to Jesus and to God.

The Old Testament

Moses authority in our Old testament reading is severely questioned and who can blame the Israelites: They are hungry, they are thirsty, they find themselves in the hostile, deadly environment of the desert between Egypt and Israel (and those of you who ventured to the Holy Land themselves will acknowledge, that it is a challenging environment even today, that without water it is downright dangerous even in this day and age.) Who can blame the Israelites for grumbling, for demanding: “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?” Moses does not and God does not either. The Israelites' demands are reasonable and justified: you have got us into this

mess, now get us out of it. Instead, Moses does the smart thing, he does not insist on his authority he asks for help, specifically he turns to the only one who can help: God. He takes some elders as witnesses and does exactly what God asks him to do. He acknowledges his helplessness, he listens to his people and more importantly: he listens to God, and this very act restores Moses' authority and credibility with his people. I suspect, that things would have been much different, that his people would have turned against him, maybe even stoned him, as he suggested, had he not listened to them and had he not listened to God, because authority for authority's sake, authority that does not stand up to scrutiny and cannot let go of power is no authority at all. And for Christians authority that does not submit to God is no authority at all.

The New Testament

In our New Testament reading the chief priests and elders question Jesus' authority, his right to teach in the synagogue, they question the content of what he is saying: Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" and in his answer, Jesus pays back in kind, defies and questions their authority in return, is not afraid to take on the official religious and ritual powers of the temple. Instead of complying with their request he asks them a question about John the Baptist, that draws out their cowardice and their lack of fitness to lead as they talk among themselves: "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?'"²⁶ But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." And in the end, Jesus refuses to answer their question in point blank contempt:

"Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things". That may have been a brave thing to do, it may not have been the smartest thing to do in the common sense, it will certainly not enhance Jesus' chances of a quiet life. And yet, Jesus whole life on earth seems to me to be defined by challenging authorities from cleansing the temple to eating with tax collectors and sinners, and frequently like in today's reading, he takes them on directly: "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you."³² For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him." That is dynamite and some people say that in the eyes of the world, leaving God's plan for redemption to

another sermon, that it is this kind of speaking that brought on his death on the cross.

... and today

I must admit that I had my issues with the word authority even in the Bible, even in relation to God, especially when so much of the old testament tradition is so bloodthirsty and cruel, calling for revenge and retaliation, especially when so many of Paul's letters call for unquestioning submission to the law, precisely because we are free of it. I was sceptic until in one lecture when I was studying for the ministry here in Glasgow, Doug Gay, the Principal of Trinity college said something that stuck with me: To submit to God's authority means that it leaves no room for submission under the authority of the world. Accepting the authority of God means to reject all other authority, where it stands against God's word. And this has led the prophets of old to challenge kings and queens, to risk their lives for their people in God's name, this has led to the bravery of the ministers publishing the Barmen declaration during the Nazi regime, which reads: "We reject the false doctrine that, apart from this ministry, the Church could have permission to, give itself or allow itself to be given special leaders [Führer] vested with ruling authority.", a clear rejection of Hitler and his party's authority over our church, over our lives. Accepting God's authority over worldly authority has led to Martin Luther King's famous speech I have a dream, in which he says: "we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: "Free at last!", Accepting God's authority has led this year's General Assembly declare that racism is a sin and that black lives matter. Accepting God's authority over worldly authority is the cause for Christians standing up for righteousness and justice, speaking out for the oppressed and marginalised. And this is a legacy that makes me proud to be a Christian. AMEN

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

Loving God,

We give you thanks for all you have given to us through your grace, for all you have shown to us in your mercy. We thank you for the gift of hope in adversity, for the gift of faith when we are afraid, for the gift of love that stays with us always and in giving thanks for these the highest of all gifts we remember in prayer those who seek you and your gifts and cannot find them.

We will always pray for those bereft of hope in zones of war and unrest, of violence and terror, be that in Libya in Syria or anywhere else in the world, we pray for all, who fear for their lives and the lives of their loved ones each day, for all who are injured in body and soul, for all who have lost all their possessions and do not know how to survive

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer

We will continue to pray for all who are in the grip of the worldwide corona virus pandemic, for all who fight for their lives in hospitals or at home, for all who live with long term side effects, for all who put their lives at risk on the frontline and for all who are at risk and worry for themselves or someone they love, worry about someone they love

Lord. In your mercy, hear our prayers

We pray for all who feel the economic consequences of the corona virus here in this country and all over the world, for all who have already lost their job or worry that they will do so, for all who face poverty and hunger, homelessness and destitution, for all who worry about their future and that of their children]

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We will never cease to pray for all who suffer in our congregation and community, for all who are lonely and bereaved, for all who are ill and frail, at home, in care homes or in hospitals, for all who are isolated and alone,

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer

For this we pray in Jesus name. AMEN

Benediction

And the God who has the authority to bind or to loose 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