



ST JAMES AYR – SUNDAY REFLECTIONS – 18 October 2020



Introduction

Dear all,

Welcome to this week's Sunday Reflection. We are delighted that you share it with us.

I wonder if I can ask, if you share these reflections with anyone who you know might be interested, either through the post or by leaving a print at the doorstep and that you remind our friends of our online and telephone services

I would like to invite you now to join our reflection and prayer.

The prophet says:

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6,8)

Prayer

Gracious God,

We come to you today, to hear your word, to be guided to the path of righteousness through your word, through your prophets, through your son, we come because we believe that it is possible to build your kingdom here on earth. Grant us wisdom and courage, we pray so we can follow you onto your path, see your light at our feet.

We give you thanks, for you guard us and guide us, your word is inscribed in our hearts and souls and we know what is good and right in your eyes, we know what you ask of your people and we know that you give us the strength and the courage to keep your commandments and to walk the path of righteousness

We give you thanks for your son Jesus Christ, whom you have sent for the forgiveness of our sins, who redeems us where we fail to walk in your path, where we fail to bring justice and peace, where we fail you and fail each other, who has come to this earth to share our suffering and our sorrow, so we may share in your glory.

We give you thanks for the holy spirit that lives in us and through us, through which we are guided by you, although we do not see you, by which we follow your path, even when it is dark, confusing and frightening, which lights the way with the flame of hope and faith, so we finally find you and live in you.

Gracious God,

We know we sometimes lose the path towards you, the path of righteousness and go down the path of darkness fear and sin, we know that we can be selfish and ignorant, that we do not want to see the hungry child, the desperate mother in our midst, that we do not want to have much to do with poverty and misery. Grant us your compassion, we pray

We know, our life can be dark and frightening, we know that the flame of hope sometimes dies down to a mere spark, we know we are often consumed by hopelessness, fear and despair in these dark times when we wonder, where you are, when we wonder, if you have forsaken us, as your son wondered on the cross. Grant us faith in you, we pray

Loving God,

We know we have failed you in word and deed, we know that we will fail you again and again, but we also know that you have already forgiven us, through your son Jesus Christ who died for us and rose for us, so we may have eternal life and in this assurance we bring before you what moves our heart.

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: Isaiah 5, 1-5

I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. “Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled.”

Lesson 2: 21, 33-42

Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. ³⁴When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ ³⁹So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.” Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes’”?

Reflection

A pandemic

It is probably not news to you that the pandemic we are living through is not the first in human history, it is not even the first in British or European history. So, let me share you a true pandemic story from my country, a pandemic story we have in common through the shared history of the reformation:

In August 1527, the plague that was raging through Europe struck the university town of Wittenberg, where Martin Luther worked as a professor of theology. People knew the signs, people were scared, they left the town in their droves, hoping to escape the deadly disease. Martin Luther and his wife however, decided to stay and more than that: they decided to help tend the sick.

They understood the fear of their fellow citizens, no doubt they were scared themselves. Nevertheless, they opened their house to the sick and gave them both care and pastoral comfort. Martin Luther did not see the plague as a punishment, nor did he condemn those who fled the city, but as a test of faith and he wrote to a fellow minister: It takes more than a milk faith to await a death before which most of the saints themselves have been and still are in dread. And so, this short history is a tale of fear and pain, it is also a story of hope and faith. It has, I think, much to do with today's scripture reading.

Consequences

Today's reading is highly symbolic. It draws on ideas and references known to the reader of the time, such as Isaiah's vineyard song from our old testament reading, it is also a story of fear and of pain: The parallels are unmistakable: it is not only the familiar symbol of the vineyard, the similarities go much deeper: both owners put considerable effort into their property: they dig it up, clear it of stones

and plant precious fruit, they build a wall and a watchtower and dig in a winepress. Both owners are disappointed with the results: the one with the tenants, the other with the fruit itself. And if you read on, both really deal with God's disappointment with his people, the failure and the evil that lies in their choice.

Those parallels are no coincidence, you can be as sure as night follows day, that Matthew knew our Old Testament text, that he drew on it deliberately, drew on tradition and ancient knowledge to make a point: All is not well in God's kingdom, God is disappointed and angry. The parallels are no coincidence, but neither are the differences: In Isaiah's story it is the fruit itself that is bad: "Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?"

A straightforward simile implying that God's people do not listen to him, that their relationship is strained. Bad grapes instead of bad apples, so to speak. If you read on in Isaiah's text you will find the following verse: The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel the people of Juda are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

The people of Israel. God's people know what to do, they have God's written word, his commandments, they know to love God above all else and have not others next to him, they know not to steal, not to murder, not to covet, they know to look out for the widow and the orphan, they know they are supposed to follow God's law, they choose not to and must bear the consequences.

Fear and Pain

Or new testament reading is a bit more complicated. The fruit are just fine, it is the tenants, the stewards the vineyard owner puts his trust in, who fall short, who act with avarice and greed, with callousness and brutality, who steal, beat and murder:

“The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷ Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ “

And now the reason both for the differences and for the similarities of the two Bible stories become obvious: the servants beaten and killed by the tenants are no other than the prophets of old, sent out by God to gather fruit, to make people follow God, to encourage and to warn. And how are they met: with contempt and ridicule, with brutality, with persecution and sometimes even with execution. And when God – who is of course represented by the vineyard owner – sends his son, he is killed, crucified, to be precise. No wonder, God is angry.

All the same: both Isaiah’s story and Matthew’s story are disconcerting: They do not fit in with our picture of the compassionate, merciful and forgiving God we believe in and we pray to. Both stories, I believe – or rather: I know – have not been conjured out of thin air, they come from lived experience: Both stories, I think are born of fear and pain, the first of fear of war and destruction through the Assyrians, the second of fear of the persecution the first Christians had to suffer within the Roman empire, in which Matthew clearly sees the continuation of the suffering and persecution of his own people. And this explains the harshness of both texts, the talk of punishment and destruction, the threat of our new testament reading: “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they

replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.” It is born of fear and of pain, and both Isaiah and Matthew acknowledge the suffering of their flock.

Fear and pain is something we can all relate to, these days, I would think. Fear and pain is to some degree what we all experience, some more than others, although our fear, our pain does not come from our fellow humans, is no inflicted injury, it comes from an illness, a pandemic that we share with humanity all over the world. And we can acknowledge the fear and the pain that has become part of our lives, the fear of a devastating disease, the pain of isolation and loneliness, the uncertainty of our future, both as individuals and as a society, we can acknowledge the pain that a changed life brings, we can acknowledge it, because the Bible does so, too, does not paint a rosy picture of a fairy tale paradise world, but speaks of the real hurt, people were and are experiencing. The Bible is rooted in real life, not in a faraway paradise, that has nothing to do with our here and now.

Hope

But our new testament reading at least, goes beyond that pain, looks to the future in hope (and that by the way, too, is an allusion to an older prophetic text): Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:” ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes’”? And so beyond the fear and the hurt, beyond the painful experience there lies hope, hope founded in Jesus, who was rejected during his time on earth, but has now become our cornerstone and God himself has done this. Hope, that we can cling to in the midst of pain and fear, that things can change, hope in the midst of isolation and heartbreak, that we are not alone, hope in hope itself, hope against all hope: that the stone rejected by the builders, will become the cornerstone, our cornerstone, our rock, the foundation of our fortress, hope in God and hope in Jesus. And this hope in the midst of pain and fear, is what has made God’s people resilient from the beginning of his history with us,

hope in the midst of pain and fear is, what will get us through this difficult time, I am certain of it. AMEN

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

Loving God,

Today we thank you especially for the faith and the hope you have given to us, a faith and a hope that makes us strong in adversity and sorrow, because we know if you are for us, none could be against us, because we know that you fight our battle and are in our corner, because we know that we can entrust our lives to you and in this knowledge we pray for those who have lost faith and hope.

We pray for all who are suffering in regions of war and violence of civil unrest and instability, we pray for the people of Syria and Libya, scarred and traumatised, afraid and vulnerable. We pray for the people of Armenia and Azerbaijan, whose glimmer of hope was extinguished so quickly. Grant them your strength.

In your mercy, hear our prayers

We continue to pray for all who are fighting the coronavirus pandemic, for all who live in fear and isolation, for all who are ill in hospitals and care homes all over the world, but we also pray for all scientists and doctors who carry the beacon of hope in a battle that we can only win in unity and in peace. Grant them resilience in their work

In your mercy hear our prayer

We pray for politicians in our country in Westminster and Edinburgh and all over the world, that they may see a way of working together, of coming together in the fight against a common enemy, may they find a way to see the people they are responsible for before the power they wield. Grant them your wisdom, so they may become wise rulers

In your mercy, hear our prayer

We will always pray for everyone in our community and congregation, especially for those who are ill and frail, at home, in care homes or in hospital, for all who are bereaved, isolated and alone, for all who care and worry for someone they love. Grant them the courage that comes from faith and hope in you, we pray.

In your mercy, hear our prayers.

For this we pray in Jesus name AMEN.

Benediction

And the God of peace and righteousness 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