



ST JAMES AYR – SUNDAY REFLECTIONS – 28 July 2024

Introduction



Welcome to a new Sunday Reflection, as we talk about repentance and forgiveness

Please consider sharing this document if it is safe for you to do so.

INTIMATIONS

4 August: Coffee after Church

21-30 August: Minister on annual leave

Call to worship

The prophet Joel says:

Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, (Joel 2, 13)

Hymn:

Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Let us pray

Loving God,

We offer our whole being to you today, our hearts and our minds, we offer our joys and our sorrows, our hopes and our failures to you knowing that you accept us as we are, knowing that you know our hearts and our thoughts, knowing that you love us with all our failures and regrets.

Gracious Lord,

Today we give you thanks for your holy word, for the encouragement of the psalms and the warning of the prophets, for the apostles who spread the good news of our salvation around the world. We thank you that through your word you have promised to be our fortress and our strength, a constant helper throughout our lives, compassionate and slow to anger.

We praise you for sending us your son Jesus Christ, the word incarnate, who has freed us from our sins and failure through his death on the cross and through his resurrection on Easter day, who has defeated death and sin in your holy name and will bring us all to eternal life.

We offer our thanks for the Holy Spirit, through which your word comes alive in our hearts as a burning, unquenchable flame, through which we know your truth, through which we know right from wrong, through which we know and can live your will.

Forgiving God,

It is not always easy to listen to and heed your word, it is not always easy to follow your son's teachings. Sometimes we are tempted to choose the easy way, to say yes, when we should say no and to say

no, when your word commands us to say yes. Help us to make the right choices and prove to be true followers of Christ, we pray.

It is not always easy to turn back to you when we know that we did wrong, it is not always easy to face our mistakes, to repent and to ask for your forgiveness. Help us to take responsibility for all we have done and help us to seek your forgiveness, we ask

Gracious Lord

We confess to you with contrition that we have failed you and our brothers and sisters in Christ, but we know that your son has redeemed us from our sins and shortcomings, and trusting in our salvation, we pray to you as Jesus has taught us to pray.

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

Hymn:

All Ages Talk

Hymn:

READINGS

2 Samuel 11, 6-21

David then sent a message to Joab: "Send me Uriah the Hittite." So Joab sent him to David. ⁷When Uriah arrived, David asked him if Joab and the troops were well, and how the fighting was going. ⁸Then he said to Uriah, "Go on home and rest a while." Uriah left, and David had a present sent to his home. ⁹But Uriah did not go home; instead he slept at the palace gate with the king's guards. ¹⁰When David heard that Uriah had not gone home, he asked him, "You have just returned after a long absence; why didn't you go home?" ¹¹Uriah answered, "The men of Israel and Judah are away in battle, and the Covenant Box is with them; my commander Joab and his officers are camping out in the open. How could I go home, eat and drink, and sleep with my wife? By all that's sacred, I swear that I could never do such a thing!" ¹²So David said, "Then stay here the rest of the day, and tomorrow I'll send you back." So Uriah stayed in Jerusalem that day and the next. ¹³David invited him to supper and got him drunk. But again that night Uriah did not go home; instead he slept on his blanket^[a] in the palace guardroom. ¹⁴The next morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by Uriah. ¹⁵He wrote: "Put Uriah in the front line, where the fighting is heaviest, then retreat and let him be killed." ¹⁶So while Joab was besieging the city, he sent Uriah to a place where he knew the enemy was strong. ¹⁷The enemy troops came out of the city and fought Joab's forces; some of David's officers were killed, and so was Uriah. ¹⁸Then Joab sent a report to David telling him about the battle, ¹⁹and he instructed the messenger, "After you have told the king all about the battle, ²⁰he may get angry and ask you, 'Why did you go so near the city to fight them? Didn't you realize that they would shoot arrows from the walls?' ²¹Don't you remember how Abimelech son of Gideon was killed? It was at Thebez, where a woman threw a millstone down from the wall and killed him. Why, then, did you go so near the wall?' If the king asks you this, tell him, 'Your officer Uriah was also killed.'"

Mark 6, 35-44

When it was getting late, his disciples came to him and said, "It is already very late, and this is a lonely place. ³⁶Send the people away, and let them go to the nearby farms and villages in order to buy themselves something to eat." ³⁷"You yourselves give them something to eat," Jesus answered. They asked, "Do you want us to go and spend two hundred silver coins on bread in order to feed them?" ³⁸So Jesus asked them, "How much bread do you have? Go and see." When they found out, they told him, "Five loaves and also two fish." ³⁹Jesus then told his disciples to make all the people divide into groups and sit down on the green grass. ⁴⁰So the people sat down in rows, in groups of a hundred and groups of fifty. ⁴¹Then Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven, and gave thanks to God. He broke the loaves and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. ⁴²Everyone ate and had enough. ⁴³Then the disciples took up twelve baskets full of what was left of the bread and the fish. ⁴⁴The number of men who were fed was five thousand.

REFLECTION

Let us pray for the Holy Spirit

Loving God,

We give you thanks for your presence among us, we give you thanks for your forgiving love for us, we thank you that we can turn to you again and again, that you love us and forgive our frailties every time. And in giving thanks we ask that you may send your Holy Spirit to us, so we are drawn to you and turn to you in all our frailty.

For this we ask in Jesus' name. AMEN

Friends,

Just when the election in this country is over, everyone turns their eyes to the USA, to the battle for the presidency there, as events unfold with breathtaking speed. The sensation of the week was of course, President Biden's withdrawal from the race and if I was to ask you who has not heard of it, I am willing to bet, that there would not be a single hand raised. It was a U-turn in the truest sense of the word, Biden turned around and suddenly the whole campaign has turned. What I found remarkable is that as soon as he made that decision, the tone towards him changed. Suddenly the disastrous TV duel is forgotten and his achievements and his positive character traits, his integrity, his patriotism, his good reputation on the international stage, his success with the American economy are once again centre stage. You could cynically say that this is politics for you, but I think, it is at least partly genuine, it is one of those rare instances in this world, where turning around is rewarded. Turning around is not that rare in Biblical terms, and it is not a negative, either, it is a requirement, when we are on the wrong path, when we have turned away from God. It is called repentance, and it is God's promise that we can turn around again and again. When we have made a mistake, when we fail, when we sin, we will get a second chance. That is called forgiveness. Today's Old Testament reading is

about taking the wrong path, about having to turn around, it is also a text about politics, albeit the politics of an ancient world.

You will have noticed that in our Old Testament readings we have followed the story of king David for a wee while now. Up to now we have seen David as the golden boy, as the national hero. From his victory over Goliath to his acclamation as the king, he was the unchallenged and unquestioned leader, God's chosen one. In today's reading that changes – and it changes dramatically. We see a completely different side of the king, so much so that most modern scholars say that the two stories, the two sides we see of David cannot possibly be written by the same person- the differences are too great. From being the hero and the darling of the nation, David stoops to cowardly, ruthless and devious murder. He kills Uriah, one of his best officers, a model soldier who will not go home to the comforts of his own house, while his men and the covenant box are camping in the field. And David does not even defeat him in open combat, like he did once upon a time with the mighty warrior Goliath, he sends a letter to his general Joab and asks him to put Uriah in a dangerous position, on the frontline, where he would almost certainly be killed by the enemy. And to add insult to injury, Uriah is to unwittingly deliver his death sentence himself. And why does the king do that, what has Uriah done to deserve such a fate, you might well ask. And the answer is: Absolutely nothing. Uriah's attitude and service are exemplary. To go and eat, drink and sleep in the comfort of his own house while his commander and his soldiers are on the battlefield? "By all that's sacred, I swear that I could never do such a thing!" Uriah says. David's motives, on the other hand are less than noble, as we learn, when we read the passage just before our reading today: He fancies his officer's wife Bathsheba, plain and simple – and it is not just a passing fancy either – David's passion has unwanted consequences that need to be covered up. And so, David tries to give Uriah some front leave first, an opportunity to see his wife. But Uriah refuses. Then he tries to get his officer drunk, to cloud his judgement. That does not work either and finally he plots Uriah's murder. And for the first time David does not look good.

Questions are asked: How does David's devious act compare to Uriah's open and honourable demeanour? How can he do this to one of his best men? Why does he engage his whole army in such a perilous and nonsensical attack or in Joab's words; "Why did you go so near the city to fight them? Didn't you realize that they would shoot arrows from the walls?" – all to kill a single man, all to cover up his own immorality. And what is David doing in Jerusalem anyway, while his army is at war? As their king should he not be on the battlefield?

And for the first time, God is angry with David, as we learn when we read on from our passage today. And angry is maybe too mild a word. This is not what God has made David king for. This is a blatant abuse of power, of God's law and David is about to feel the consequences. God sends his prophet Nathan to him to read David the riot act: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. ⁹Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. ¹⁰Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.'" That is David told. And he will have to live with the consequences. Because the king is not above God's law. He has to abide by it like everybody else. He had made that promise when he brought the covenant box, the ark that holds the ten commandments, to Jerusalem. Now, all David can do is to pray and to fast and to ask God's forgiveness. He is forgiven, he remains a great king, but the damage is done: this passage is the beginning of the end of David's reign.

I like this story, not because of its gory details or because of the fast-paced narrative. I like it for his sheer humanity: David has failed – big time. He has failed his army, his country and worst of all: he has

failed God, broken his laws. And that goes to show: nobody, not even the king is free from failure and frailty, not even God's chosen one is free from sin. And if even David fails in God's eyes, then we can, too. We do not have to be perfect before God. We can and will make mistakes, we can and will fail, we can and will sin. It is a profoundly human attribute to be flawed, not even God's chosen king is exempt, so how could we be? And this is strangely liberating. It does not exempt us from trying to be good and godly Christians, of course not. But God takes our humanity and our frailty into account, he has made us like this – and he has still made us in his image. He accepts us with all our failures and with all our sins. And if we repent of them, then God is more than ready to forgive. After all, that is what Jesus died for: nobody can help failing and sinning, not even great king David, but we can all repent, and we can all trust in God's love for us and in his forgiveness.

At first sight our New Testament reading has nothing to do with our first text or with the theme of sin, regret, repentance and forgiveness. It is the well-known story of the feeding of the five thousand, a miracle and a sign of Jesus' compassion. While the disciples want to send the crowds that have gathered away, while they ask somewhat incredulously how much money they are supposed to spend on food for this many people, Jesus, after having ascertained, how much there is to eat – not a whole lot, five loaves of bread and two fish – does something very simple: he breaks bread and gives thanks before the food is distributed among the hungry crowd. It is reminiscent of communion, where we break bread, give thanks and share it among each other. And that is the connection to our overall theme of repentance, because that is what we always do in preparation to communion – to confess, to repent and to remember that Jesus gave his body for our sins. And so, the bread distributed becomes spiritual nourishment, as well as physical, both in our story and in our communion practice today. Jesus caters for all the needs of the crowd that has gathered around him and his disciples, and he asks for nothing in return. It is a gift from God and God's gifts are for free, his forgiveness, his love and his care are

given without question. We do not need to earn or deserve it. We can just receive and for this we can give thanks. AMEN

Hymn:

INTERCESSION

Loving God,

We can come to you with all our troubles, with all our regrets and you will be there for us, you will welcome us with open arms, whenever we turn to you, whenever we come back to you. For this we thank you and in offering our thanks we think of all those who have no one and nothing to turn to, we think of those who live without hope.

We will never forget to pray for all who are caught up in regions of war and conflict, of unrest and violence in Ukraine, in Israel and Gaza, in Yemen and elsewhere in the world. We pray for all who live in daily fear for their own lives and the lives of those they love. Be with them in their suffering, we pray.

Lord, in your mercy hear our prayer

We pray for all who flee their country, who try to escape a desperate situation, who wander their country displaced and in despair or who find themselves in refugee camps with insufficient sanitation or provision. We pray for all who leave their homes, their countries, not because they choose, but because they must. May they find hope in you, we pray.

Lord, in your mercy hear our prayer

As we watch the rapid developments in the USA, we pray for politicians here in this country and all over the world, that they may strive to rule with justice and wisdom, that they may not be blinded by power and act in the interest of their people. May they be able to turn to you when their office becomes a challenge.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer

We will always remember to pray for everyone in our congregation and in our community and we pray especially for all who are ill and frail in hospitals or at home, for all who grieve for a family member or friend, and for all who live a lonely and friendless life. May you comfort them with your presence and may we be your hands and feet for them.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer

For all this we pray in Jesus' name. AMEN

We prepare for the dedication of the offering

Dedication

Loving God,

You have given us your living word to guide us through our lives, to give us hope and to assure us of your love for us. For this invaluable gift we thank you and in gratitude for this your greatest gift we give you some of what already belongs to you, and we ask that you may bless these our offerings, so they are used to your glory.

For this we pray in Jesus' name. AMEN

Hymn:

Benediction

And the God who forgives our sins 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

