

Readings for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

6th June 2021

First Reading: 1 Samuel 8:4-20

All the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.” But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the LORD, and the LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.”

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—“I believed, and so I spoke”—we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Gospel: St Mark 3:20-35

The crowd came together again, so that Jesus and his companions could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

"Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" — for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

A Reflection for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

Earlier this week, we heard in the News about the world No.2 tennis player, Naomi Osaka. She refused to speak to the media after her match at the French Open, citing her mental health as the reason. She was fined by the tournament organisers and then withdrew, perhaps before she was suspended. Since then, information has been released about how she has suffered from depression since winning her first Grand Slam tournament, and there has been discussion about the way in which some in the media treat athletes, especially when they do not live up to expectations. Many have spoken up in Osaka's defence; others have simply said that it is part of the job.

Hearing this small part of her story, that which lies behind her undoubted success as a player, illustrates for me some of the contradictions of human nature. There is a part of human nature that wants to conform, to be the same as everyone else and not stand out from the crowd. And when someone does stand out, for whatever reason, it can engender a strange fascination in others. It may be a tendency to hero-worship, to put someone on a pedestal and make out they are even more outstanding than is really so. Or, or perhaps And, it may make others want to bring that person down to their level, to criticise and play down their success.

Today's readings speak to these tendencies in us as human beings, both as individuals and as a society. In the reading from Samuel, the desire to conform was at the forefront for the people of Israel who saw themselves as different to the surrounding nations. Israel was a *theocracy*, a nation ruled by God through the priests such as Samuel, whereas other nations were monarchies. But Samuel, their trusted priest and leader, was getting old and his sons were nowhere close to providing a similar level of moral and religious leadership. The people were fearful and anxious, failing to remember that this system had been established by God and that God had cared for and protected them. Instead, they concluded that what they needed was to be 'like other nations' and to have a king, in doing so rejecting God.

Samuel's warnings of the consequences of monarchy sound, as one commentator said, very much like taxes and national service! The irony is that he also portrays something akin to slavery – the very thing from which God had set the Israelites free in Egypt. However, Samuel's warnings went unheeded. The people were determined that they could manage for themselves with a king. And, as history showed, with the exception of a few good kings, the establishment of the monarchy ultimately led to the division of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, destruction and exile.

The Gospel reading shows us two different reactions to Jesus. Jesus was not like others; he did not conform to the norms of the society of the time. Today's passage comes fairly early in Mark's account of his ministry. He had healed people of various conditions, been on a preaching tour and appointed his disciples. These events, especially the healings, have excited the interest of many people who have come to him and brought others. At the end of chapter 1, Mark tells us that 'people came to him from every quarter'. But Jesus' declarations that sins were forgiven, and his sabbath healings, also drew criticism – initially from the religious leaders and then as mutterings in the crowd. Now, Jesus and his disciples have gone home, and the crowd has re-convened there.

We are told that his family initially tried to restrain him but are not told why. It is easy to imagine the social pressure and concern for family honour. We can almost hear the neighbours 'Have you heard what their boy Jesus has done now?' But maybe his family were simply concerned for his safety. Criticism from the religious leaders, and their ability to whip up a hostile crowd, was a real danger, as was shown at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry in his arrest, trial and crucifixion. Jesus' response to his family, at the end of the reading, was not a rejection of them but did enlarge the definition of family to include all those who do the will of God. Not everyone had turned against him and perhaps this enlarged definition of family encouraged his own family by showing they were not alone.

The religious leaders, as we hear so often in the Gospels, saw Jesus as threat to their power, and failed to see past their own self-interest to the truth of his teaching and the evidence of the miracles. He was someone who did not have the right credentials, was not one of them, and so they sought to discredit him. 'He has Beelzebul' they said – Satan, the prince of demons. Jesus' response here was to point out the inconsistency of their argument: the good he was doing undermined the powers of evil. If it were the work of Satan, it would destroy Satan himself. However, he then goes on to use the image of a strong man being bound to illustrate that evil can be overcome if the power behind it is defeated by someone stronger – that person being Jesus, who has already overcome the temptations of Satan in the wilderness.

So, in these two readings, we see three responses to standing out from the crowd which have important things to teach us about human nature and our response to God. The Israelites wished to conform with their neighbours, ignored the warnings they were given and forgot the help and protection of God that had been given them. We are reminded of the importance of gratitude to God and others; the perils of pride in our own self-sufficiency; and that our choices have consequences. Then we have Jesus' family who wanted their son to conform to the norms of society, and we should be thankful that their wishes didn't prevail. However, they remind us that those who do stand out, particularly when standing up for what is right and good, need our support. And finally, the religious leaders' response to Jesus, with criticism to protect their own interests, which may have gained them some short-term advantage but ultimately was a spectacular failure. It shows us the futility of such behaviour and how it reveals more about those criticising than the one criticised.

Naomi Osaka stands out from the crowd as a result of her exceptionally good tennis. That exposure is clearly something that she has also struggled with and which the attitudes of some others have not helped. Concerns about mental health of individuals and groups of people have gained increasing prominence in recent years, but especially in the past year. As a society, we now deal with mental health issues better than we used to, but there is still plenty of room for improvement. Better news for tennis was that, later in the week, some conciliatory moves were made by the organisers of Grand Slam tournaments, and by those in the media, to try to improve the situation for players whilst still meeting their own needs. They are, after all, all dependent on each other in what they do.

As Christians, there are times when we or others are called to stand out from the crowd and not to conform. It can certainly be an uncomfortable place to be – it often goes against our human nature as we have seen. When we do so, we need the support and encouragement of others and not their criticism. When others do so, they too need the same from us. Of course, there will be times when we disagree with what someone is standing for, but support and encouragement should allow space for discussion and debate without resorting to the negativity of criticism. It is never wrong to be kind.

In all this, we should be guided by our faith. St Paul, in the passage from the letter to the Corinthians, writes of having the spirit of faith, that is in accordance with scripture, that guides us in what we say. Encouragingly, he goes on to tell us that the advantage of the ageing process is that, as he puts it, 'our inner nature is being renewed daily'. Whatever age we are, each day we gain experiences which will enable us to broaden our perspective and grow in wisdom. Or at least, they will if we are prepared to reflect on them in the light of our faith to learn from them. And it is that wisdom that helps us to respond in Christian love, with kindness, even when we are out of our comfort zone.