

## Readings for the Third Sunday after Pentecost

13<sup>th</sup> June 2021

### First Reading: 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed is now before the LORD." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

### Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:6-10,14-17

Brothers and sisters, we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

The love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

### Gospel: St Mark 4:26-34

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

Jesus also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

### **A Reflection for the Third Sunday after Pentecost**

While I was away in Perthshire with my family recently, one of the great pleasures was the wildlife we saw. Roe deer were grazing in the fields, there were birds everywhere, including nesting ospreys, one of which flew right past us on a walk, fish were leaping in the river and red squirrels were playing in the trees. But the highlight was something quite unexpected. As one of my sisters, her husband and I walked along the River Tay, we noticed that some of the trees had been chewed by something, and that quite a number of the smaller trees had fallen. On closer inspection, we saw that the stumps had been gnawed into a characteristic point. This was the work of beavers. That evening, as it was drawing towards dusk, we all went out along the riverside again, this time on the opposite side to where we had seen the tell-tale stumps. After a reasonably lengthy wait, my sister spotted a beaver, and then another, swimming up and down near the opposite bank. They were even doing characteristically beaverish things like dragging branches about in the water to add to what might have been the start of a dam across a side-stream, although we didn't see them fell any trees.

A bit of gnawed bark and some tooth marks on a tree aren't very significant in themselves but led to beavers – a species that, twelve years ago, was extinct in this country. In today's Gospel, in two short and familiar parables, Jesus speaks about seeds – things that are also not very significant in themselves but have great potential. These two parables are Kingdom parables, allegories that each adds a little more to our understanding of what God's kingdom is like and about how we should live as Christians in that kingdom.

In the first one, we are told of a farmer who scatters the seed but does not know how it then grows. Nevertheless, he is ready to reap the harvest when the time is right. Such growth is still a mystery to us: like gardeners and farmers of old, we can and do nurture plants, but we cannot make something grow ourselves, even though we now have a better understanding of the chemical and biological processes involved. Similarly, the work of the growth of God's kingdom is a mystery, not something that we can force. This is reassuring if we are anxious about lack of progress, the state of the church or that people seek their spiritual comfort elsewhere. However, it is not an invitation to be inactive or passive. In the parable, the farmer was waiting and ready, no doubt caring for the crop and watching what

was happening, so that the harvest could be reaped as soon as it was ready. We too have a responsibility to be alert to those places where God is at work in the world, nurturing that work and ready to act as God requires.

The parable of the mustard seed tells of how the smallest of all seeds becomes the greatest of shrubs so that the birds can nest in the shade of its branches. The contrast reminds us that the Kingdom of God may seem insignificant and perhaps vulnerable in our society, but the potential is there to provide shelter and refuge for all. In being alert to the signs of God's kingdom, it is a reminder not to ignore the apparently insignificant and marginal places, for it is in such places that God is so often at work.

In both these parables, seeds are seemingly insignificant and yet are shown to lead to growth and fullness. These are signs of the kingdom: God's kingdom will also be revealed from small beginnings. Both parables seem to contain a warning not to judge by appearances, something can be found in today's passage from Samuel too.

Last week, we heard how the people of Israel wanted to be like other nations and demanded a king, despite the warnings from Samuel of what this would mean for them. Since then, Saul had become the first king but had failed to follow God's commandments and now God intervened to appoint a successor who would renew the monarchy. So we hear of this strange beauty parade of the sons of Jesse. God tells Samuel not to judge by outward appearance saying '...for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.' And yet, after seven sons of Jesse have passed in front of Samuel and not been chosen, when the youngest, David, is brought in, what we are told about him is his appearance: '...he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome.' It seems like a contradiction of what has just been said.

But what struck me was the phrase 'he had beautiful eyes'. For the past year, as we have looked at each other from behind our masks, unable to see each other's facial expressions, we have looked to the eyes to try to gauge reactions and feelings. Recently, I was reading an article by a former FBI agent who had specialised in training agents in counterintelligence and counterterrorism. He described the eyes as 'formidable communicators of feelings' that can tell us much if we can interpret it, although he did warn that there is also a lot of mis-information about what eye contact or lack of it, in particular, is conveying. So maybe being told that David had 'beautiful eyes' does in fact tell us something positive of his inward state, something of his heart that God looks for.

In the first letter to the Corinthians, St Paul said that, if we accept the love and work of Christ in dying for us, we are transformed; a new creation. Because of the love of Christ in us, 'we regard no-one from a human point of view'. Paul saw all humanity through what God has done in Christ – all the goodness and potential that is there behind the outward appearances. Just as God does not judge by outward appearances but looks at the heart, so the love of Christ enabled Paul, and enables us, to see beyond outward appearances to the image of God that is in each person.

A couple of weeks ago, I was very lucky and seeing the beavers was a wonderful new experience for me. But it required alertness to the signs that beavers were about and patience to wait for them – something that my sister is much better at than I am. Similarly, these passages teach us of the need to be alert for the signs of God's kingdom around us, looking beyond outward appearances and taking note of things that may seem insignificant or marginal, to be patient but ready to respond when the time is right.

Inevitably, it raises the question of where we think God is at work in our lives and communities. That's a tricky one because it will vary, and will be different for each one of us. However, I think that generally it will be in those situations

that involve building loving relationships with others. God sows seeds that bring people together, perhaps in surprising or unexpected ways, and our task is to nurture those relationships, some of which will grow and flourish and through which God's kingdom can grow and flourish.