

## Readings for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

18<sup>th</sup> July 2021

### First Reading: 2 Samuel 7:1-14a

When the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you.”

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

### Second Reading: Ephesians 2:11-22

Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Gospel: St Mark 6:30-34,53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

**A Reflection for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

It's the holiday season. That's something we can't fail to notice in this part of the world, particularly this year when trips abroad are, at best, difficult to plan, and increased numbers of UK residents are holidaying in this country. However, busy as it seems, I suppose it must be balanced to a certain extent by fewer foreign visitors. Holidays are important. Whether we go away somewhere or stay at home, we all need time off from the daily round to rest and re-charge our batteries. Such times also provide an opportunity to think, to re-evaluate the things we do and our priorities in life.

Spiritually too, we also need to take a break from time to time. Not time off from God, our prayers or church, I hasten to add! Rather, setting aside time to do more of those things, to reflect on and deepen our relationship with God, and above all to listen to God and try to discern God's will for our lives.

At the beginning of our Gospel reading today, we see the importance that Jesus set on time apart. The disciples had been sent out by Jesus, proclaiming repentance, healing the sick, and casting out demons – that sending was part of our Gospel reading two weeks ago. They have just returned and reported back on the success of that mission, and Jesus urges them to come away to a deserted place and to rest. In the Gospels, we often hear of Jesus going to a quiet place to pray. A quiet time apart, with God, was something that prepared and re-energised him for his ministry. And he knew that the disciples also needed that time to rest, reflect, discuss and pray, to prepare them for the task ahead. They needed what today we might call a retreat.

However, on this occasion, their attempt to retreat failed. We are told that they went off on their boat but that the crowds saw them and, when they arrived at their destination, were there to meet them. Jesus was filled with compassion for them, they are described as being 'like sheep without a shepherd'. The ordinary people of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Galilee were working people: farmers, fishermen, traders, labourers and craftsmen. They were poor people, many living at subsistence level, heavily taxed by the occupying Romans, and failed by their political and religious leaders. As a carpenter, Jesus would have recognised their daily struggles and their grasping at the hope a new prophet might bring. We can imagine people milling about somewhat aimlessly, wondering what was happening having heard of

some of the miracles, not wanting to leave in case 'something' happened, something that might bring healing and hope in their lives.

We are told that Jesus began to teach them, but then our Gospel reading leaves out a large chunk of the text, which includes the feeding of the 5000 and the miracle of walking on water as the disciples cross the lake again in their boat. We come back to that next week. Today's Gospel reading resumes and we see that there was no let-up in demand – the crowds kept coming, bringing the sick for healing. Jesus' compassion meant that they were never turned away. He fed them spiritually, and sometimes physically too.

On this occasion, Jesus and his disciples did not get the retreat they desired and hoped for. Nevertheless, we see that Jesus understands the importance of a time of withdrawal, the need to create a sacred space, even though he remains available for the care of God's people.

The principle of Sabbath rest is a deeply fundamental Biblical idea. In Genesis, we read that God's work of creation included time to sit back and enjoy it. But our modern, non-stop, 24/7 lifestyles, the constant receiving and sending of messages and calls, has rather obliterated Sabbath rest. Many or most of us need to make a deliberate effort to find some Sabbath space. Perhaps that is why quiet days and retreats, organised or private, have increased in popularity in recent years. An older tradition, and one that has also increased in popularity, is pilgrimage.

Prior to the Reformation, pilgrimage was an important part of spiritual life in this country. There were the major pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Rome or Santiago de Compostela, but there are also many historic sites of pilgrimage in Scotland, to the shrines of saints such as St Ninian at Whithorn, St Duthac at Tain, and St Columba at Iona, as well as to holy wells and other sites.

Pilgrimage or journey as metaphor for life is an ancient idea. Simplicity of life, danger and discomfort were all part of it, especially if the purpose was penitential. Walking or travelling is a great way to separate yourself from the familiar routines and structures of everyday life, of being dependent on those you meet on the way. The journey itself, rather than the destination, can enable you to see your life and God more simply and clearly.

2021 and 2022 have been designated as a Season of Pilgrimage by the College of Bishops. In this season, as many people as possible are encouraged to make a holy journey of some kind. This could be as part of an organised pilgrimage, individually or in a small group, by walking, some other mode of transport, or a journey in the mind, focussing on our own spiritual journeys.

A pilgrimage or retreat is a time to listen, primarily to God, perhaps speaking through those around us, maybe to talk, to explore the ideas that strike us for the first time or in a new way, and to be open to the unexpected. I mentioned last week that we all have our own God-given role to fulfil in the world. This is not always an easy thing to fathom out and is not necessarily static – we are often called to different things at different stages in our lives. Sometimes, when we get away from it all, we find that what we are currently doing isn't quite right, that God has a new or different idea.

In today's Old Testament reading, David found that his ideas and God's weren't the same. David had been busy doing God's work including, as we heard last week, bringing the Ark of God to Jerusalem, and God has given him rest from his enemies. He even seems to have found time to build himself a fine house and now he wants to build a house for the Ark of God. Is there perhaps a twinge of guilt there that he had built his own house first? Or is there an element

of pride in what he has achieved for God, and this would be the icing on the cake? We don't know. But what we do know is that God said 'No'. God is in control, not David, and this task is to be for a later generation.

So to take a pilgrimage or a retreat is to follow in the example of Jesus, to set time apart from the busyness of our lives, time to pray and to listen, to rest and be refreshed by God's Holy Spirit. A time to check our spiritual compass and to discern God's will for the next stage of our lives. If you have not taken part in a quiet day or retreat before, or undertaken some form of pilgrimage, I urge you to try – you can start small. Simply taking the time out for your own spiritual well-being is always rewarding and can be life-changing because God recognises our reaching out to him and promises to meet us where we are.

### **The Rev'd Donald Strachan**

1937-2021

It is with sadness that I share the news with you of the death of Fr Donald Strachan, who died on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> July. His link with the Church in Ullapool came about in that he was one of the first to receive a license as Itinerant Priest in this Diocese (1968-1973) and was sent to establish a presence for the Scottish Episcopal Church (SEC) on the west coast.

Many of us at St Mary's got to meet him on a couple of occasions in recent times, when he attended the service to mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of St Mary's in its current building in Market Street, and then a couple of years later another memorable day when we celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the re-instatement of regular Scottish SEC services here in Ullapool (monthly originally, in the Village Hall).

The keeping of both these events was prompted by Fr Donald reminding me at the time via one of his beautifully hand-written letters, which were always such a pleasure to receive. Bishop Mark joined us for those services, and Fr Donald regaled us with some highly entertaining remembrances of those early days over the congregational lunch which were part of those happy celebrations.

He retired in 1994 and went to live at Claddach Kirkibost in North Uist (where Gilly and I paid him a visit in 2019). He spent his entire ordained ministry in Scotland, although he trained at Lampeter in Wales. A dedicated and enthusiastic pilgrim for many years to the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk, he was given the singular honour of appointment to the Order of Our Lady of Walsingham some years ago.

May he now find the eternal rest and peace he so richly deserves – a good and faithful priest, for whom we at St Mary's have especial reason to give thanks.

Fr Nicholas Court