

## Readings for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

1<sup>st</sup> August 2021

### First Reading: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13

When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son.

But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD, and the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveller to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbour, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun." David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan said to David, "Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die.

### Second Reading: Ephesians 4:1-16

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity,

to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Gospel: St John 6:24-35

When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

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

Hot on the heels of the account of the feeding of the 5000 which we heard last week, our Gospel readings for the next few weeks continue the theme of bread. They are all taken from the sixth chapter of St John's Gospel and, if you have time, it is worth reading this chapter all at once, rather than broken up into sections as it comes to us in our weekly readings. This will give you a better picture of how Jesus develops his teaching on this theme.

What will you be having for lunch today? Maybe you do the traditional Sunday roast. Or perhaps it's a quick sandwich and something more substantial in the evening. Although many of us may have faced times of hardship in our lives, most of us in this country, though not all, don't know what it is like not to know where the next meal is coming from. When I was teaching, I was involved in our school partnership with a school in rural Malawi and I was privileged to visit that school on several occasions. The population of the area are almost all subsistence farmers and, for many of them, to not know where the next meal is coming from is all too common. Hunger is the inevitable reality of failed harvests. Even in good years, there is still what they refer to as the 'hungry season': that two or three months of the year when last season's stored crops are mostly used up and this season's not yet ready. It is a sobering reality that, according to the World Bank, around 10% of the world's population live at this sort of level, in extreme poverty.

As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, it is likely that many of the ordinary people of Galilee in the time of Jesus were very poor, living at subsistence level, and probably never quite sure where the next meal was coming from. In such circumstances, it's easy to understand why they would want to stay close to someone who could produce miraculous quantities of food. We can imagine how disappointed they must have been when, as we are told at the beginning of today's Gospel, they discovered that Jesus had disappeared. So some of them, probably not all 5000, headed off in search of him. When they found him, they were not quite brazen enough to ask directly for more food and so we have the question 'Rabbi, when did you come here?'

Jesus, however, cuts to the chase. He wanted to focus on their spiritual rather than physical needs, and accused the crowd of ignoring the sign and just wanting physical bread. This is not to suggest that he considers their physical needs unimportant. We know from elsewhere in the Gospels that he cares deeply for the needs of the poor and, indeed, he has just provided for those physical needs in abundance. But now he encourages them to focus on spiritual rather than material food. Both are important, so where is their next spiritual meal coming from?

In John's Gospel, the word 'sign' has a particular meaning. 'Signs' are those miracles that reveal Jesus' divinity, that he is the Messiah. Here, it is apparent that the people have seen the miracle but not the sign, they have seen the material side but not the spiritual, so Jesus urges them to work for 'food that endures for eternal life' which will be provided by the Son of Man, on whom God has set his seal.

This is a challenging statement. 'Son of Man' is a clear reference to the Messiah, and, by their response, we see that the people are starting to understand a bit more, although they hedge around it a bit, looking for more clarity perhaps. In thinking about their next question, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?', we should remember that the common expectation at that time was of a Messiah who would be a military leader, who would free Judah from Roman occupation. If Jesus really is the Messiah, as he is claiming, maybe the 'works of God' that they should do is to join the revolution, as the Messiah triumphantly overthrows Rome. But Jesus corrects them. Their work is to believe in him who has been sent by God, that is to be totally committed to him and to trust him.

This is not what the people expected and, still unsure, they asked for another sign, despite the fact that they had only just experienced the sign of the feeding. And they referred to their ancestors being fed by manna, bread from heaven, in the wilderness. This is, of course, a reference to the manna provided to the Israelites after they left Egypt during their 40 years wandering in the wilderness, something that the people attributed to Moses. However, by the time of Jesus, manna had come to represent spiritual food – a metaphor for living out the Law of Moses. By faithfully doing so, their expectation was of God's sustaining presence eternally. Jesus corrected their understanding, pointing out that it was God, not Moses, who provided the manna in the wilderness, something that was a daily miracle for 40 years. The sign that they need to understand now is that, by miraculously feeding 5000 people, Jesus had done what only God can do

Jesus' teaching on bread points beyond physical hunger to the deeper spiritual hunger of humanity. The hunger that searches for meaning in life, and ultimately for salvation, that says to our souls that there must be more than this. Down the centuries, people have expressed this deep yearning for meaning in music, art and poetry, and have sought to satisfy it in many ways. Communism in Stalinist Russia tried to suppress it; our society often tries to fill the gap with materialism. But Jesus tells us that there is only one thing that will satisfy this deep spiritual hunger, and that is God.

Last week, our New Testament reading from Ephesians was that wonderful prayer of Paul for the church which ends with his hope that they may be filled with 'all the fullness of God'. In the light of today's Gospel, we may understand that as being filled with the 'bread of heaven', the spiritual sustenance that comes from knowing, believing in and trusting God and his Son, Jesus Christ. In today's reading, Paul continues with the image of the church as a body composed of many parts, a metaphor used in various places in the New Testament, not just here. It is a reminder that, however well we think we can manage individually, we all need each other. God gives the gifts of different people with their different talents to the church so that we may all be built up in faith. As he said, we need apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers. We need people like Nathan, in today's Old Testament reading, who will speak up when something is wrong and call people to repentance. We need people of prayer, people with a good listening ear, people with the gift of hospitality, people with many different practical skills, people who are encouragers. In short, we need each and every individual, for one way in which God feeds us spiritually is through the gifts of one another.

The miracle of the feeding of the 5000 was a sign that pointed to Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, the one who provides us with the 'bread of heaven', the food that satisfies our spiritual hunger and desire for meaning. As St Augustine said:

Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.