

Readings for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

5th September 2021

First Reading: Proverbs 22:1-2,8-9,22-23

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favour is better than silver or gold.

The rich and the poor have this in common:
the LORD is the maker of them all.

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.

Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.

Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;
for the LORD pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them.

Second Reading: James 2:1-10,14-17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Gospel: St Mark 7:24-37

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair

to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

A Reflection for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Last week, I mentioned that we will be keeping the Season of Creation during September. Today, it is my intention to give some background to this season and then think a little about the first of various themes connected with it.

This season has its origins back in 1989 when the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Churches recognised a day of 'prayer for creation' at the beginning of their liturgical year on September 1st. Since then, the concept has been adopted by the wider ecumenical community and developed as a Season for Creation which runs from September 1st to October 4th, the feast day of St Francis of Assisi in the Western church.

The Scottish Episcopal Church has not previously formally acknowledged the Season of Creation in its calendar, although many of our churches have kept it, as I know some (or all?) of our congregations have in this charge – so my apologies if you know this already. However, this year, we see a number of different strands coming together which make this time, in which we acknowledge and reflect on the fundamental relationship between God, the natural world, and humankind, ever more important. Thus, our church has 'joined the party' and designated this Season of Creation as time to renew our relationship with our creator and to join with our brothers and sisters across the world in prayer and action.

Perhaps the most significant thing that is coming up is the COP26 United Nations Climate Change Conference, to be held in Glasgow at the beginning of November. Following the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, three international conventions were agreed, the best known of which is the one on climate change. The Paris agreement in 2015, at COP21, was the culmination of more than 20 years of international diplomacy. Nations agreed to act to limit the global temperature rise to less than 2° Celsius, preferably only 1.5° Celsius. Since then, each country has started to develop plans to limit greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change, although these still have a way to go if the target is to be achieved.

In connection with COP26, today has also been designated 'Climate Sunday' and, this afternoon, there will be a Nations' Climate Sunday service in Glasgow Cathedral. This is described as 'a testament to the churches' desire to show love for God and neighbour by caring for creation and acting on climate change.'

The effects of climate change have been very much in the news in recent years, and seemingly particularly so this year. We have seen many extreme weather events across the world in recent months, although many people in developing countries have been facing droughts and floods that destroy the crops of subsistence farmers for many years. However, the Season of Creation is about more than the natural world and our effects upon it. It also encompasses our relationships with one another across the globe, all within our relationship with God. Of course, concern for the world, and action to bring change for the better, is clearly not the preserve of Christians, or of people of faith more generally, but as Christians we should locate such concerns and actions within our faith.

The group of ecumenical leaders that oversees the Season of Creation has given this year's season the title 'A Home for All? Renewing the *oikos* of God.' *Oikos* is an ancient Greek word that refers to family and home. In English, it comes down to us as the prefix 'eco-', something I'll come back to.

In the book of Genesis, we read of how God set a dome over the earth and put all that lives under it. Whilst we know that the sky is not a literal dome, the imagery that everything is under the one roof, in the one home, created by God is important. Human beings were given the responsibility to care for and cultivate this home or *oikos* of God. So, in this season we are encouraged to reflect upon how we understand and can renew our world as an inter-connected and inter-dependent community loved by God.

One of the English words with the *oikos* or eco- prefix is 'economy'. In fact, 'economy' comes from the two Greek words *oikos-nomos* which together mean the rules of the house or home. So God's economy is about God's rules for the world, the way we live and relate to one another, and that includes our use of the world's resources. Economics is not simply a secular issue.

Looking around the world, the vast discrepancies between the richest and poorest nations are evident. According to a report published by Oxfam last year, there is the startling statistic that the world's richest 1% of people are more than twice as wealthy as the bottom 90% of people. Finance is also a key part of COP26, to provide the resources to protect the most vulnerable, and to help decarbonisation in developing countries, help that they need due to economic disparity despite the fact that their carbon footprint is much lower than that of developed nations.

Whilst there have always been rich and poor, the divide between the two continues to widen. Does this sound like the way God wants the world to be, like God's economy? Jesus had plenty to say on the subject of love of money, and generosity, and he had a particular concern for the poor and marginalised, and our readings today also speak to us of these issues.

Proverbs tells that it is those who are generous, who share their bread with the poor, who are blessed. Sharing rather than giving suggests that the person who does this is not necessarily wealthy themselves but has noticed the need of another person and responded with compassion. We are also reminded that God is on the side of the poor, God pleads their cause, and will judge those who oppress them.

The reading from the letter of James reminds us that we should treat rich and poor with equal respect and regard. We find it only too easy to pay attention to the powerful and those with the loudest voices, but it is through the poor and needy of the world that God speaks most clearly. At the end of this passage, we are told that fine words, kind thoughts and prayers are not sufficient: we also need to take action on behalf of those who suffer.

In our Gospel reading, we have two accounts of Jesus healing people who were on the margins of society, the first the Syrophenician woman's daughter, and the second a deaf-mute man. The account of the Syrophenician woman's daughter is disturbing as Jesus seems to rebut the woman initially and to refer to her as a dog. We don't know why, in this case, Jesus was so offensive, and we should be wary of trying to explain it away, but she turns his argument around and convinces him. So despite initial appearances, Jesus again demonstrates how God's kingdom reaches to those pushed aside by society.

We live in a world where global economic structures have created systems in which the poorest often have no voice, that over-exploits the world's resources, and in which those of us in the developed world live in ways which, indirectly, bring hardship to others. I've mentioned some of my experiences in Malawi before. Whilst the people I know there would be regarded as economically very poor by our standards, they are rich in so many other ways (which is not to justify poverty) and I have learnt so much from them, not least about community and hospitality. As individuals, we can't change the structures of global society, but we can pay attention to the values of God's economy. We can and must pray, but that needs to be followed by action. We should listen to and take notice of the poor, not to change them, but to be changed by them. We should take action by responding with compassion where there is need, by using the resources that God gives us responsibly, and by using such political leverage as we have to address injustice.

As I have said before, we are called to do what we can, not what we can't. Our circumstances differ and there are no simple answers. Nevertheless, this Season of Creation is a reminder and an opportunity for all of us to take time to think, pray and act. The world is our common home under God, and we are called to play our part in making it sustainable for all people and all creation.