

## Readings for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

12<sup>th</sup> September 2021

### First Reading: Proverbs 1:20-33

Wisdom cries out in the street;  
in the squares she raises her voice.  
At the busiest corner she cries out;  
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:  
“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?  
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing  
and fools hate knowledge?  
Give heed to my reproof;  
I will pour out my thoughts to you;  
I will make my words known to you.  
Because I have called and you refused,  
have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,  
and because you have ignored all my counsel  
and would have none of my reproof,  
I also will laugh at your calamity;  
I will mock when panic strikes you,  
when panic strikes you like a storm,  
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,  
when distress and anguish come upon you.  
Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;  
they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.  
Because they hated knowledge  
and did not choose the fear of the LORD,  
would have none of my counsel,  
and despised all my reproof,  
therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way  
and be sated with their own devices.  
For waywardness kills the simple,  
and the complacency of fools destroys them;  
but those who listen to me will be secure  
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

### Second Reading: James 3:1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able

to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

#### Gospel: St Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

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

We have the very good fortune to live in a beautiful place where the glories of the natural world are, in modern parlance, very much ‘in your face’. We see the grandeur of the scenery, the variety and beauty of wildlife, the shades of changing light. Even in places that might be considered less-obviously glorious, we see the beauty of nature in a park, a garden or a delicate flower poking through a crack in the pavement.

For many Christians, the natural world speaks to us of the glory and power of God. And behind the beauty is the very precise fine-tuning of the fundamental constants of the universe, and the way that such factors have coalesced in one place to make such life on Earth possible. Some years ago, I remember watching a bird on a feeder in a friend’s

garden. I can't remember what the bird was except that it was small and colourful - a goldfinch perhaps. But I do remember being forcefully struck by its incredible intricacy and beauty, its sheer fullness of life, and just how astonishing the possibility of life is, what a huge number of things come together to make it possible. The thought that went through my head was 'How can anyone not believe in God when they see this?'

I said last week that the theme of this year's Season of Creation has been given the title 'A Home for All? Renewing the *oikos* of God.', and that *Oikos* is a Greek word referring to family and home which gives us the prefix 'eco-' in English. Another word with this prefix is 'ecology', the study of living organisms and how they interact with their environment. The '-logy' part of the word is derived from the Greek word 'Logos' meaning 'word' or 'reason', so we could also think of ecology in terms of what the world, our home, can teach us.

Since the earliest days of the church, theologians have understood that God reveals himself to us in different ways, in particular through God's two books: one is the Book of Scripture and other the Book of Nature. Both Scripture and the natural world bear witness to the glory and truth of God and also teach us God's wisdom for our lives.

Wisdom is a thread that runs through today's readings. The Psalm set for today, Psalm 19, illustrates the importance of these two books of God. The first part speaks of creation:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork.  
One day tells its tale to another, and one night imparts knowledge to another.  
Although they have no words or language, and their voices are not heard,  
their sound has gone out into all lands, and their message to the end of the world.

The natural world is a testimony to the presence and glory of God in creation, but also, although it has no words, it imparts knowledge. Through the study of the natural world, we should learn of the delicate balances of nature that allow different species to thrive alongside each other, and learn how to live in harmony with that God-given natural order.

The second part of Psalm 19 speaks of God's book of Scripture.

The law of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul;  
the testimony of the Lord is sure and gives wisdom to the innocent.

Scripture is testimony to God's presence with and care for his people throughout history. It also reveals his guidance and teaching through the Law, the prophets and the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and, for us as Christians, through the Gospels and other writings of the New Testament.

In Proverbs, Wisdom is personified as a woman. Although theologians differ on whether this personification of Wisdom is simply a literary device designed to enhance the message and bring it to life, or if Wisdom represents the Holy Spirit or even a pre-incarnate Christ, it is clear that Wisdom is intimately associated with God. In today's reading, Wisdom is there amidst the busyness of life, calling people to listen and warning them of the consequences of ignoring her. Wisdom is an attribute of God but also something we should strive to acquire. Elsewhere in Proverbs, we are told that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Fear, not in the sense of being frightened, but of having reverence for the greatness and power of God and showing that by following God's commandments.

Our reading from the letter of James is about the power of the tongue, and uses images from the natural world to demonstrate this: 'How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire.' James says that no-one can tame the tongue and, in one sense he is right, for we all say things that we should not at times. But it is also with the tongue that we share the knowledge and wisdom of God, that we express God's love and care to those around us and we speak out against injustice and unsustainable exploitation of the Earth. Wise action is to cultivate this aspect of speech and to curb that which causes harm.

In our Gospel reading today, we heard Mark's account of Peter's confession of Christ. "Jesus asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.'" It was a God-given insight. But Peter's understanding was not yet complete, and it was shortly followed by a devastating rebuke. As Jesus goes on to speak of the suffering he will endure, Peter rebukes him and Jesus utters those awful words: 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' Peter's faith, and his struggles, and his later transformation into a leader of the church, as he grew in wisdom and understanding, should be an encouragement to us. We too can be transformed by God's wisdom and ourselves grow in wisdom and understanding.

God's book of nature, as well as God's book of Scripture, speaks to us of God's glory and wisdom, and teaches us how to live in harmony with each other and all of creation. We should gaze at the universe, at the earth with reverence and awe and learn from it God's wisdom in how to care for our common home.

Later in today's Gospel, Jesus utters the well-known words: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' In this Season of Creation, what might it mean to deny ourselves and take up our cross?