

Readings for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

3rd July 2022

First Reading: 2 Kings 5:1-14

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.' So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, 'Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.'

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, 'When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.' When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, 'Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.'

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, 'Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.' So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, 'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.' But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, 'I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?' He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, 'Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, "Wash, and be clean"?' So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Second Reading: Galatians 6:7-16

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised – only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been

crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule – peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

Gospel: St Luke 10:1-11,16-20

The Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, “Peace to this house!” And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.

Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, “Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.”

Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.’

The seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!’ He said to them, ‘I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.’

A Reflection for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Since being a teenager, I have had a passion for watching live football. For me there is nothing more exhilarating than being part of a crowd that are united in supporting your team. The other week I was at Wembley with 40,000 other Nottingham Forest fans to watch our team gain promotion to the Premiership, 40,000 voices all chanting and singing in unison.

Football is a little like our Christian faith in the sense that they can both arouse great passions. I suspect that the great religious revivals of the past held the same feelings of the collective fervour that I experienced at Wembley stadium. I have to say that football is a simple game to understand compared to Christianity, some may consider the offside rule as being complex but believe me it is very simple when compared with the mystery of the Holy Trinity

Football supporters know their players in their team, their strengths, and weaknesses, they will know their manager’s preferred combinations of players, game plans, and preferred formation. Whether he is likely to play a straightforward 4-4-2 combination or a more defensive 5-3-2 formation, depending on who and where the team are playing.

When a team is winning cups and leagues, the manager may take on a messianic status in the minds of the crowd, but when the team is losing then inevitably there will be calls for the manager to be sacked. It's all about winning.

For over 25 years I had a season ticket at the City ground Nottingham and over the years I got to know the people sitting around me, One person I sat next to for many years was Bishop Patrick Harris of Southwell and Nottingham. I didn't at first know he was a bishop and we used to talk only about football. He was a sort of Victor Meldrew character who would mutter, 'I don't believe it', when our team were not playing well. When he eventually told me who he was, we still spoke of football but in the context of our shared faith. He told me once that when he visited churches around Nottingham, he would often put on his Forest scarf and urge the congregation to chant and sing for Jesus with the same passion that they would chant for the Forest manager Brian Clough.

He used to bemoan the fact that many Christians lacked the passion for their team that football supporters had for theirs.

There are some interesting comparisons with football and our Gospel reading today

In the first place Jesus asks the 70 whom he is sending out, only to do that what they had seen him do in their time together. Jesus in his ministry proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom through his actions and in his words. He physically healed the sick, exorcised those who were thought to be demon possessed, and he fed the hungry, and he told stories to explain what the kingdom of heaven was like.

And these were the things he asked the 70 to do: to proclaim that the kingdom of God is near, through their actions of curing the sick, in their conversations and in sharing God's peace. The 70 had been trained and coached by Jesus just as a football manager coaches his players on the training ground,

They were to rely on the hospitality of others, to be part of their communities. They were to make themselves vulnerable, sent into the midst of wolves, to share God's peace wherever they went. The message they had to impart both to those who accepted them and to those who turned them away was the same, - the kingdom of God was near, the only difference was that there were dire consequences for those who rejected them.

Over the years I have visited many football grounds to watch Forest play. One of them is Sheffield Wednesday's ground at Hillsborough, the scene of the Hillsborough disaster. It is often forgotten that Liverpool was playing Nottingham Forest on the day of the disaster.

Years ago, there used to be a man who paraded outside the ground with a placard the said 'the kingdom of heaven is nigh'. I often wondered what the crowds made of those words, certainly, most people just ignored the man, I suspect very few would have a clue what those words meant, and there is a lesson there for us, in what words we use to talk about our faith.

However, it would have been different in Jesus's time. The Jews would have understood the kingdom of God as encompassing both the earth and the heavens, where all living things and the heavenly host were governed by God. More specifically, they would have understood that God was the God of the people of Israel whom God had chosen as his special people. But he was not only a God of the present, he was the God of a future salvation who would rescue Israel from their enemies. God's kingdom was understood as being both present and yet to come.

The idea of God in an age yet to come had taken on an immediacy by the time of Jesus, when people were looking to the imminent arrival of a Messiah to lead the people of Israel to victory over their oppressors, the Romans.

So when Jesus sent out the 70, they knew very well what they had to do, they had been well coached by Jesus, and the people they were going to visit had a good idea of what they were talking about. Not like the crowd outside the Sheffield Wednesday ground.

Jesus had clarified what the coming of God's kingdom would be. He emphasised that it was not something men and women could accomplish through their own efforts, it was a pure gift of God, a gift of God's grace. Jesus through his actions of healing and feeding the hungry had shown that it was also characterised by great compassion mercy and forgiveness, love, and peace.

Through his stories, Jesus had shown the people how the values and priorities of God's kingdom were contrary to those of the world. How in God's kingdom, the outcast, the poor, the merciful, those who mourned, the pure in heart, would be first and the rich and powerful would be last.

In many of Jesus's parables the kingdom of God is portrayed as a great treasure that when found was to be joyfully celebrated; it was like a wedding banquet where everyone was celebrating. As Bishop Patrick expressed it, it was something that should be celebrated with the same passion and fervour that football fans display when their team are winning.

Placards proclaiming that, 'the kingdom of heaven is nigh,' are meaningless for people today. However, what can have meaning are what our brilliant team manager, Jesus, taught through words and action about sharing God's peace, of showing compassion to the stranger and the outcast, and in speaking words of peace, love and hope to our broken world. That is how we convey the message, 'the kingdom of God is near',