

Readings for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

14th August 2022

First Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7

I will sing for my beloved

my love song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard

on a very fertile hill.

He dug it and cleared it of stones

and planted it with choice vines;

he built a watchtower in the midst of it

and hewed out a wine vat in it;

he expected it to yield grapes,

but it yielded rotten grapes.

And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem

and people of Judah,

judge between me

and my vineyard.

What more was there to do for my vineyard

that I have not done in it?

When I expected it to yield grapes,

why did it yield rotten grapes?

And now I will tell you

what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge,

and it shall be devoured;

I will break down its wall,

and it shall be trampled down.

I will make it a wasteland;

it shall not be pruned or hoed,

and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;

I will also command the clouds

that they rain no rain upon it.

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts

is the house of Israel,

and the people of Judah

are his cherished garden;

he expected justice

but saw bloodshed;
righteousness
but heard a cry!

Second Reading: Hebrews 11:29-12:2

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death; they were sawn in two; they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Gospel: St Luke 12:49-56

Jesus said to his disciples, "I have come to cast fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain,' and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

A Reflection for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Although many people enjoy watching sport, either live or on television, I confess that, generally, I am not one of them unless I happen to know one of the participants. However, when big events, like the recent Commonwealth Games, come along I do tend to get swept up in the excitement, the successes and disappointments. I end up watching snippets of all sorts of different sports. In these recent Games, it has been inspiring to see the para-sports fully integrated into the programme and to come across sports such as Lawn Bowls, one of the longest-standing Commonwealth Games sports apparently, where medallists are in their 70s.

The Commonwealth Games have been known for many years as the 'friendly games' because one of their main aims is to bring people together and to emphasise the importance of participation rather than winning. I am sure those athletes at the top of their sport do compete to win, but for others, getting a personal best or simply being there amongst those elite athletes must feel like a huge achievement. And the mutual encouragement, congratulations and commiserations between competitors of different nations has often been evident during the Games.

Today's reading from the letter to the Hebrews continues the description of the faith of the ancestors from last week as they and we wait for God's promises to be fulfilled at the end of time. Some are more well-known to us than others. There are some who achieved great things, and others who had a very tough time, suffering torture, imprisonment, and death. But all are part of the story of faith, the story of God's people.

Our past is important. The popularity of TV series such as 'Who do you think you are?', where the family history of celebrities is investigated, is one demonstration of our human need to connect to our past. Learning about our ancestors shapes our view of ourselves. Those people listed in last week's and today's readings from Hebrews are some of our spiritual ancestors.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to describe this history and its continuation as a race in which we must participate in our turn: 'Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, ...' The courage, perseverance and faithfulness, of those who have gone before, including that of many more recent saints, gives us the strength to run the race in our own time and place. And we also have the example of Jesus. Those who have gone before us, that great cloud of witnesses, are now like a crowd of spectators cheering on the current generation. How we run the race will be our testimony of God's faithfulness to generations to come.

So this race is a relay. We receive the baton, run our leg, and then pass the baton on. We are there amongst the elite athletes and Jesus is there to show us the way – we just need to keep our eyes on him.

In the Commonwealth Games women's 4x400m relay, the England team missed out on the Gold medal. Although they crossed line first (just), they were disqualified on a technicality because, earlier in the race, one of the team had strayed into the wrong lane. Of course, rules are important for fair competition but what a huge disappointment for them and especially the competitor that made that mistake. Thankfully in race of faith, we don't get disqualified when make a mistake. We do need to repent and set those mistakes aside, but then we continue carrying the baton for our leg of the race. But neither can we give up and step away if things happen to get tough, as it certainly did for many of those mentioned in the reading from Hebrews – we are part of a team.

By choosing to be on the 'faith team', we choose not to be part of certain other things, and sometimes that can cause division. Jesus, who so often teaches the importance of peace-making, says in today's passage from Luke's Gospel that he has come to bring fire and division. This passage is sometimes referred to as the 'Little Apocalypse' as Jesus warns of the coming of God's Kingdom and the reckoning that it will bring. And in today's passage from Isaiah, there is a similar warning of coming judgement on those who have betrayed the covenant with God.

We shouldn't be entirely surprised by this mention of division. Earlier in the Gospel (2:34), Simeon prophesied over the infant Jesus: 'This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed.' By the time of today's passage, opposition to Jesus' teaching has started to grow. What he teaches is not easy – some will follow and others will turn aside, dividing households. He tells those listening that, although they have seen him perform miracles, heal the sick and confront the authorities, they have not learnt to interpret these signs. Jesus has inaugurated God's Kingdom on earth and they need to be able to recognise the signs with the ease that they predict the weather.

We live with diversity, not least within the Anglican Communion, and living with that diversity is an act of faith. A remarkable thing occurred at the recent Lambeth Conference. Despite rumblings beforehand of anticipated divisions, and indeed in some reports since, the Bishops from across the Communion accepted that differences exist within the Communion and committed to continue listening to one another and learning to understand the different contexts of the Provinces. Members of faith communities do not always agree and diversity is inevitable but that does not necessarily lead to the division of separation. It is how we respond that is important.

In last week's Gospel, Jesus spoke of being 'ready' – to do so, this week's message is that we need to 'pay attention'. We need to learn discernment, to read the signs of God's Kingdom and respond in ways compatible with them, so that we can fully run our leg in the race that is God's story of the world.