

Readings for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

28th August 2022

First Reading: Jeremiah 2:4-13

Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. Thus says the LORD: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves? They did not say, 'Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?'

I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination. The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?' Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit.

Therefore once more I accuse you, says the LORD, and I accuse your children's children. Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has ever been such a thing. Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit.

Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

Second Reading: Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' So we can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?'

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Gospel: St Luke 14:1,7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable.

‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, “Give this person your place,” and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher”; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’

He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’

A Reflection for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

‘It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.’

I am sure that many of you will recognise the opening words of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. They are the thoughts, apparently, of the scheming Mrs Bennett as she strives to marry off her five daughters, preferably to rich men, in a society in which, for them to remain unmarried and without independent means, would have been seen as a disaster. Snobbish as she was, and comical as her attempts at social climbing appear, in a sense she was only following the norms of the very hierarchical society of the time.

The society of first century Palestine also had its norms and concerns about status. Meals in homes had great social value and invitations from the wealthy were a measure of one’s place in that society. Such meals, which were of course restricted to men, took place while reclined around a U-shaped table. The closer one was to the centre of the U, and therefore to the centre of conversation, the more important one was considered to be. This is the setting for today’s Gospel reading.

Jesus has been invited to a meal at the house of the leader of the Pharisees on the sabbath. Generally we think of the Pharisees as being hostile to Jesus, as indeed many were or became as they saw him as a threat to their authority. So why was Jesus invited? The Pharisees were committed to interpreting the Jewish Law to gain a greater understanding of God’s intentions for the people. Many of them were curious about Jesus’ interpretations, which were so often different to their own, and a meal was an opportunity for discussion. This occasion is one of several such meals with Pharisees described in Luke’s Gospel.

Jesus observed how those who had been invited strived for the most important places at the table and, as he so often did, turned it around. Common sense and good manners should guide one to take the lower place rather than risk the shame of being demoted from the higher to the lower place. An attitude of humility rather than self-importance is preferred. Jesus is not actually saying anything new here. His audience would have been familiar with the Book of Proverbs (25:6-7) where it says:

Do not put yourself forward in the king’s presence or stand in the place of the great,
for it is better to be told, “Come up here,” than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.

As in so many of our readings in recent weeks, it is a reminder about the values and attitudes of God's kingdom. If modesty makes sense in social settings, how much more important is humility before God? Humility is the right attitude for appreciation of God's awesome greatness and God's grace towards his people.

But Jesus has more to say on the subject of hospitality than commenting on the behaviour of the guests. In that society, an invitation carried an obligation on the recipient to respond in kind, so, a bit like Mrs Bennett, hosts may well have had their own schemes and intentions behind their invitations. Again, Jesus values humility, urging hosts to have attitudes of inclusion and hospitality. Invitations should not go simply to those to whom they have social obligations, or people of a similar social status, or political allies, but to all - even or especially to those that they know will not be able to reciprocate. The banquet in God's kingdom welcomes all – the poor, the lame, the maimed and the blind – and the Pharisees themselves too.

Although we live in a very different times to those of Jesus, or even to the early 19th century setting of *Pride and Prejudice*, it is worth reflecting on how our own society, is still concerned with social status. Where we live, what we wear, what car we drive, all say something about us, our values, and our place in society.

Our other readings today, also comment on the attitudes and behaviour of God's people. In the passage from Jeremiah, God laments the corruption of the people, the priests and the prophets. They have turned away from him despite all that he has done for them. In a vivid image, God has offered them the fresh, living water of life and they have chosen cracked holes in the ground full of stagnant water. Who would do such a thing?

I am always wary of ascribing human feelings to God. Nevertheless, the span of the Old Testament tells of the deep relationship between God and the people; and given that humankind is made in the image of God, it is surely possible for us to have an inkling of the depths of God's sorrow at the behaviour of the people, those he loves who have spurned all he offered. God doesn't want grand gestures. As we have already seen from our Gospel reading, God welcomes all who come with an attitude of humility.

The reading from Hebrews speaks of how the attitudes and behaviour of the Christian community bears witness to the presence of God's kingdom. In this list of instructions for Christian living, mutual love, meaning within the community, and hospitality to strangers, an expression of love, are the guiding principles. All the other instructions flow from these instructions to love. Jesus Christ is unchanging and he provides the strength through which we are able to live out these values.

Hebrews makes clear that compassion and empathy with those who suffer are part of this expression of love, and we are encouraged: 'do not neglect to do good and to share what you have'. The Season of Creation begins later this week, a time when churches of many denominations reflect on the Christian imperative to care for the world and its people. As today's reading from Jeremiah points out, God says: 'I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination'.

This is a season in which to think about how we lay aside trappings of privilege or social status and consider how we do what is right by the world that is suffering in its entirety. A season to consider afresh how we share the earth's resources. A season to express our love of God and all that God has given us, our mutual love, and our hospitality to strangers.