

## Readings for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

7<sup>th</sup> August 2022

### First Reading: Isaiah 1:1,10-20

The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation – I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

### Second Reading: Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren – because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Gospel: St Luke 12:32-40

Jesus said to his disciples, 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'

**A Reflection for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost**

When preparing this week, I read of an instance where people were asked to rate their individual faith on a scale of zero to ten, where zero is no faith and ten is the greatest level. If I were to ask you to do the same thing, I wonder where you would place your faith?

I find it is not an easy question. I hope no-one chose zero, but I would also be surprised if anyone chose ten. Most people place themselves somewhere in the middle because faith isn't an either/or choice of faith or no faith, it's a spectrum. We live our lives somewhere on that spectrum and our position can and should change over time.

And what would you say if you were asked to define faith? That is also not an easy question to answer because faith is quite a complex idea. At the beginning of today's reading from the letter to the Hebrews, the writer tells us: 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not yet seen.'

The writer goes on remind the audience of the story of Abraham and his family. Abraham trusted God and set out on a journey to an unfamiliar land. As part of the ongoing story, some of God's promises to them are fulfilled, and fulfilment of many others remains in the future. So they learned to trust God and play their part to help generations to come. Like them, we also live our lives with this mixture of knowing and trusting God through what God has already done and hoping for what is still to come, unseen and at least partially unknown. So, we could say that faith is based on our knowledge of God and what we, individually or collectively, have already experienced, but it also has a future dimension: a longing to know God better and for God's promises to come to their fulfilment.

Faith is also about relationship with God, again both as individuals and together as God's people. It encompasses understanding of God's promises, the things we believe to be true. Faith in God is something we choose because we believe it is trustworthy. And faith also entails faithfulness or allegiance to God, remaining true to it even if God's promises are not fulfilled in our lifetime. Living faithfully requires us to look to the future Kingdom of God, not ignoring the realities of today, but seeing them in the context of eternity.

Such faith is not 'blind faith' as some prominent atheists would have people believe. It is not irrational, or without justification or proof as some would claim. When people talk about 'proof', they are often speaking of what they think of as 'scientific proof' based on observable evidence. And, as a scientist, I find this immensely frustrating for two reasons. Firstly, because there is rarely, if ever, any such thing as 'proof' in science, just a balance of probabilities; secondly because the observable, measurable evidence generally used in science is not the only type of evidence there is. Faith is not opposed to reason or science but something chosen based on what we know and experience, a conviction that God, though unseen, is real and continues to sustain the world and engage with God's people.

There are times, of course, when God's promises, even God's existence seem uncertain. All who believe in God have times of doubt, and question the reality of God and God's presence in the world, particularly perhaps when the immensity of evil and pain in the world seems overwhelming, when we go through personal trials and suffering, or when we are simply feeling lost and tired. In such times, we need reminders, like this passage from Hebrews, of how God has spoken and acted in the past, of God's promises and faithfulness. As Paul reminds us elsewhere, in the letter to the Ephesians (2:8), faith is a gift from God to those who seek him. Doubt that questions that faith, which makes us dig deeper and seek answers, can strengthen our faith as we experience more of God's trustworthiness. And God's trustworthiness is where today's Gospel reading starts.

In last week's Gospel, we heard the parable of the rich fool which warns of the dangers of wealth, and the attitudes of greed and self-reliance that can result. Self-reliance is in some ways the opposite to faith; it implies we can't trust God. In the short section of Luke's Gospel between last week's and this week's readings is a reminder of God's trustworthiness as Jesus describes how God cares and provides for the ravens and the lilies. He urges us not to worry but to focus instead on God's kingdom.

Today's Gospel begins by continuing that theme of having misplaced reliance on material things. If it is fear of being without, or of having less than others have, that makes us greedy then Jesus says Fear not! God is trustworthy and will provide all we need.

As I said last week, rejecting attitudes of materialism and the greed that comes with it is easier said than done, particularly in times of economic hardship. But we must try. Rejecting these attitudes and trusting God removes worry about money and possessions and frees us to serve God's kingdom with whatever we have. As the passage from Isaiah warns, in a roundabout way, we can't just go through the motions of what God asks of us, we need to be wholehearted.

Having re-affirmed the trustworthiness of God, Jesus then suggests how we may live our lives faithfully, fully prepared for the coming of God's kingdom. The first step is, he says, to 'Sell your possessions and give alms'. Trusting God, we are called to be generous to those in need and to get rid of those things that hold us back. Given the discouraging economic forecasts of this past week, and the ever-increasing impact of our consumption on the planet, it is clear that the world needs us to be as generous as our circumstances allow.

Then we are to 'get ready'. In an echo of other parables, Jesus uses the metaphor of a man who has gone to his wedding banquet and will return with his bride. These festivities could take a while and his servants need to be prepared even though they don't know when he will return. This prefigures the heavenly banquet when Jesus returns as King.

So how do we get ready? Let us return to the subject of faith. Our faith shouldn't be static but should grow and deepen over time as we take opportunities to learn more of God and of God's promises, reflecting on how those promises have been, are being, and will continue to be fulfilled. In this way, we continue to build our trust in God who, although God might not do exactly as we wish, will not let us down. And trusting God, we respond in the ways we believe we are called to by God. Loving action to care for our neighbour and our world is the outworking of our faith.