

Readings for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

4th September 2022

First Reading: Jeremiah 18:1-11

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the LORD came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you, from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

Second Reading: Philemon 1-21

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith towards the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love – and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.

Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Gospel: St Luke 14:25-33

Large crowds were travelling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.'

A Reflection for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

'If you have ears to hear, then hear!'

To my disappointment, these words of Jesus come just two verses after the end of today's Gospel reading. But they are so appropriate for today that I have borrowed them anyway. For today is the first Sunday in the Season of Creation and the theme for this year is *Listen to the Voice of Creation*.

As many of you will already know, the Season of Creation is an ecumenical initiative that unites Christians around the world in prayer and action for the protection of our common home. Each year, the international steering committee chooses a theme that churches may focus on. This year's theme, *Listen to the Voice of Creation*, is based around the opening verses of Psalm 19: 'The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge...**their voice is not heard**; yet their voice goes out through all the Earth, and their words to the end of the world.'

Texts like this demonstrate that, from ancient times, people believed that God revealed himself through creation. That same understanding has continued in Christianity since the earliest days of the church. Sometimes referred to as the 'two book theory', it asserts that God reveals himself both through the 'book of scripture', the Bible, and through the 'book of nature', creation. We need both, for they tell us different things about God and also about ourselves. Whilst many of us, and I include myself, find that places of natural beauty enable us to 'connect' more easily with God, to experience his love and provision for us in our lives, the 'groaning' of creation also speaks to us of what we get wrong, of the damage we cause.

Examples of the 'groaning' of creation haven't been far from our news bulletins this year. There are the current floods in Pakistan and, in the past few months, there have been floods in Australia; Europe has seen record high temperatures and wildfires and there have also been wildfires in North America. Meanwhile, some of the poorest people on the planet are suffering a catastrophic drought in East Africa. It is only just over a year since flash floods

washed away house, cars, roads and bridges in Germany, leaving many people dead. The effects of man-made climate change are very visible. Creation is far from silent.

'If you have ears to hear, then hear!' We need to hear the voice of creation and the voices of those most affected by climate change. We need to listen to those voices, we need to understand what they are saying, and we need to act on it. But that, of course, is far from easy. Few, if any of us, living in developed countries have been prepared to make the wholesale changes in our lifestyles that will be necessary to counter these effects of climate change. We hope for a magic bullet when what we need is reform. And that is now complicated by the economic crisis, the full reality of which is going to have a huge impact on many people, and which makes it harder to make those changes for the good of the planet and those less fortunate than us. Indeed, some of our politicians seem keen to reverse some of the environmental initiatives that have been taken. Is that really a solution? Will it not simply push the issue a little further down the road and make it harder to resolve?

Listening to the voice of creation is going to be tough, but that should not be a surprise to us as Christians. In God's 'book of scripture', in today's Gospel, Jesus speaks in quite uncompromising terms about the cost of discipleship. Whilst Jesus always makes it clear that God's grace and forgiveness are freely available to all who turn to him, as his disciples we are called to be whole-hearted in putting God and the values of God's kingdom first in our lives. We are not called to literally hate our families, that would be contrary to much of the rest of the Bible's teaching, but it is used as a reminder to consider our priorities.

Perhaps more relevant, in this age of environmental disaster, economic injustice and huge over-consumption by the wealthiest nations, is the last sentence: Jesus injunction to give up all our possessions. This is probably not a literal command to make ourselves destitute, but it does make very clear that our materialistic lives are out of line, both with the needs of the world and the values of God's kingdom. We need less 'stuff' not more. To borrow a popular slogan, we need to 'reduce, re-use and recycle more', especially the 'reduce'.

I acknowledge that it is difficult to make wholesale changes in our lives – I struggle with that as much as anyone. But it is possible to make incremental changes, one step at a time. The Season of Creation is a recurring opportunity in our Christian calendar to take another step forward, to choose not to have something, and to make that a permanent change in our lives. This has a cumulative effect over time as we are gradually re-formed.

Today's reading from Jeremiah, with its image of the potter and the clay, is about being re-formed. The potter is an artist who turns a lump of clay into something beautiful, or functional, or both. This passage is mainly about the nation of Judah, and speaks of God relenting from judgement if they repent, and re-forming them to a new purpose. It can equally apply to other groups and individuals: God is the divine potter who shapes us, and re-shapes us as necessary. We are as a lump of clay: in Genesis, the first man was made from the dust of the earth and called 'Adam'; in Hebrew, the word 'adamah' means earth or ground.

Although we don't use the set psalms in our services, the psalm for today is 139, many people's favourite as it speaks of our being individually known and shaped by God, precious and beautiful to him. God who has created the entire universe in all its beauty lavishes the same care and attention on the rest of creation. This should cause us to respond in worship and in care for our fellow humans and all of God's creation.

Being reformed should lead to restored relationships, the subject of Paul's letter to Philemon, albeit in a rather different context. Paul sought to reconcile Philemon with his runaway slave, now a fellow Christian. We too need restored relationships to live in harmony with God's 'book of nature', and with all God's people across the world. Our life choices should demonstrate our care for those whose circumstances are very different to our own but who are, nevertheless, our brothers and sisters.

'If you have ears to hear, then hear!' Hear, listen, understand, act. As Christians at the beginning of this new Season of Creation, let us follow Jesus to a life of greater simplicity, allowing God to re-form us and to restore our relationships with all of God's creation.