

Readings for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

18th September 2022

First Reading: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: “Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in her?” (“Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?”) “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?

O that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!

Second Reading: 1 Timothy 2:1-7

My dearly beloved, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all — this was attested at the right time. For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the gentiles in faith and truth.

Gospel: St Luke 16:1-13

Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly, for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

A Reflection for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Today’s Gospel reading challenges our understanding of stewardship, a concept that has become embedded in the theology and liturgies of the Creation Season. Our Creation Season collects and prayers abound with references to stewardship as being the right relationship we must have with the rest of God’s creation, that of acting in God’s interests to care and manage God’s creation for him. However, in today’s reading, Jesus tells us a parable about a dishonest steward, where Jesus holds up a mirror to unethical stewardship, a mirror that reflects more the reality of our stewardship of God’s creation, that is exploitative, where financial gain and political power have distorted our relationships to the detriment of land, of poor people and God’s creatures. As Jesus teaches us, you cannot serve two masters; you will either hate the one or love the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

A Steward is a biblical term that refers to a manager who is responsible for the goods and property of another. A steward is not therefore an owner, but one who has a responsibility to an owner to treat property with care and respect. Stewardship is a term that refers to the responsibility of a steward to manage wisely. It has come to be used in the Christian community in a broader sense for our responsibility to manage wisely the goods and property that are in our possession. The assumption is that we do not really possess or own anything. Rather, the world, including us, belongs to God, and it is arrogant for humans to think otherwise. Therefore, we are not owners but stewards of all that comes into our arena of responsibility—income, assets, property, goods, time, talents, and our very selves. The problem is that we may be good stewards of what comes into our possession but we have failed to care for the rest of creation.

I am reminded of a verse from John’s Gospel where a flock of sheep are threatened by a wolf, Jesus says that, when the hired hand sees the wolf he runs away because he is a hired servant and is unconcerned with the sheep [Jn10.13]. Like the hired hand, our human failure to be responsible stewards of the Earth has led to the current ecological crises threatening global climate stability, and the diversity of plant and animal species.

The concept of our ‘stewardship’ over the care for God’s earth originates with the creation stories, in which God gives humans dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the animals of the land. Humankind, including Christians, have distorted the mandate to “exercise dominion” to mean that creation was made for human beings and that we have a right to dominate and exploit creation for our own wants and needs. This has led to incalculable abuses of nature.

But ‘dominion’ does not mean and should not mean “to dominate” or “to exploit.” Rather, it means “to take responsibility for.” In the creation story, human beings were created in order to exercise responsibility for the well-being of the garden Earth. It is foundational to what it is to be human; It represents our proper human relationship to Earth.

Just as the later Christian message depicts Jesus as a servant-king, so humans are challenged in this creation story to assume a similar role: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all”. Care for creation is not about serving our own wants and desires but rather it should be about serving the best interests and well-being of all the Earth-community.

This idea of stewardship as that of humans acting as servants of creation is reinforced by the idea that creation was made for its own sake. After God created each part of creation, God saw that it was “good” in its own right—even before humans were created. If we are to be good stewards of Earth, there is a foundational reverence we need to bear toward all of life for its own sake, because it is God’s creation and it is filled with God’s glory.

The biblical writers invite us to delight in creation, and we are called to love creation. We will care for that which we love! Even more, we are invited to love creation as God loves it: not in the abstract, but concretely in terms of caring for life.

Hence, all our actions of stewardship are to be done as part of our service to the larger will and purposes of God. And we are responsible to God to care for creation. This is a sacred vocation for all humanity.

According to the Scripture, God wills for creation to thrive in all its diversity. God wills for air, sea, and land to bring health and well-being to all creatures. God wills care for the vulnerable. God wants there to be peace and justice in the land, for humans and non-humans alike. We need to see anew the purpose of our lives within the context of God’s larger purposes for the world and to exercise our stewardship in the context of this more embracing vision.

The all-embracing vision of God for creation is violated when there is injustice by humans against humans. The biblical authors know the close relationship between the ways people exploit Earth and the ways people exploit the poor. In the Bible, when people are oppressed, the rest of creation suffers too—the land languishes, and the harvests fail

Our theme for this creation season reminds us of the need to listen to the voice of creation and to speak out about the injustices that cause climate change, desecrate the land and threaten the lives of humans, animals and plants alike; we can speak out through our prayers and in our worship, and in our advocacy in public spaces. And whatever we do, particularly during the Season of Creation, we act in the hope of our faith revealed in Christ Jesus, that God creates us in mutual love, reconciles us to one another, and entrusts each to the care of the other.

I will leave you with this thought. Rather than seeing ourselves as “stewards” or “managers” of creation, are we not called to consider ourselves as co-creatures, entrusted to one another for the mutual well-being of every creature and our common home? Our eucharist prayer in this season of creation reminds us that God, after making the plants and the animals, formed humanity in his own image, and entrusted us with the priesthood of his Creation: not as stewards or managers but as priests, recognising that our care for creation and each other is a sacred role, that of caring and serving the whole of creation.