

Readings for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

10th September 2023

First Reading: Exodus 12:1-14

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbour in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the LORD. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgements: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Second Reading: Romans 13:8-14

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Gospel: St Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus spoke to his disciples. 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

A Reflection for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

"The great criticism of the church today is that no-one wants to persecute it!"

This is a quotation from George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community, that came in a series of lectures he gave back in 1954. We might think that lack of persecution is a good thing – I certainly prefer it that way. His argument was not in favour of persecution *per se* either, but a reflection that no-one wanted to persecute the church because there was nothing much about it worth persecuting. Over the centuries, the church had lost its radical edge, it no longer reflected the radical nature of Jesus' teachings that challenged complacency and the *status quo*, and pointed the way to God's values and God's call for the church to be a force for good in the world.

Today's Gospel comes from Matthew chapter 18 in which Jesus tells his followers that, in God's kingdom, the least are the greatest, warns about causing others to stumble, and of God's priority to search for the lost sheep. And then there is the passage we have today, a vision for challenging those who have offended us within our Christian community. Maybe, like me, this makes you feel a bit uncomfortable. It's not easy to tell people that we feel offended by something they have said or done; it's far easier to grumble about them amongst our friends. Neither is it easy to be told such a thing by someone; we immediately feel defensive, even if the offence was unintentional. And yet, we probably all know that, in many cases, addressing the matter as suggested here is a by far the best way to proceed. The vision Jesus lays out is also realistic, recognising that not everyone will respond positively, but that in the community of the church we belong to one another and are responsible to each other.

In this Season of Creation, this text also encourages us to reflect on how we are called to live in harmony, not only within the church but also with the rest of humanity and with all of God's creation. As Fr David outlined for us last week, we don't have to look very far to see how these relationships have broken down and how we, both as individuals and as a society, are reluctant to face up to them. Confronting such things may be unpleasant and difficult, yet this Gospel reminds us that justified confrontation can be a necessity.

Today's passage from Paul's letter to the Romans also reminds us of our responsibilities to those around us and to the world. Central to our faith is the call to "love your neighbour as yourself". How can we say that we love our neighbours if we ignore what is happening across the world, especially to the most vulnerable? Paul tells us we need to wake up! This is urgent! Are the fires, droughts, floods and storms that we see on our screens day after day not a sufficient alarm call? Or, as one member of our congregations put it to me last week, "the environmental 'alarm clock' has rung many times so I guess this must be the fire alarm".

The call to "wake up" has a spiritual dimension too. Paul calls Christians to "put on the armour of light" to face the challenges of the day. It is a call to learn to see things differently and to recognise that we can think and act in new

ways. We can draw on the wells of our spiritual traditions and learn to understand at a deeper level God's love for all people and for the whole of creation, and then we need to be willing embody that love in our lives.

Our reading from Exodus is the account of God's instructions to Moses and Aaron for the first Passover, the actions that preceded the Israelites escape from bondage in Egypt to freedom, and served as an ongoing reminder of their unity as the people of God and of God's liberating power. As Christians, it reminds us that the central ritual of our worship, the Eucharist, was born of a Passover meal. As our Eucharistic prayer, particularly in this Season of Creation, says, we too are united as one body not only with one another and the kingdom of heaven but with all of creation. Communion makes us a community with all of God's creation. It gives us courage and strength to live out our faith. As we use the gifts of the earth, bread and wine, sacramentally, so we must also hear the cries of the earth for change.

The theory is fine, of course; we all know that our faith calls us to love our neighbour and care for the earth and all God's creation. What we should do often seems much more difficult and it can be very easy to be paralysed into inaction by the enormity of the challenges that face the world. That very paralysis is perhaps a reminder that our first response should be in prayer: to lament the damage we and others have caused, for a softening of hearts to hear the cries of the weak and suffering, for guidance for ourselves and others in the best ways forward.

Like me, you have probably also met those people who take the line "why bother?" as this person, or that company, or the other country is so much worse and whatever I do will make no difference. But I hope you have also heard the 'Starfish' story: starfish have been washed up on a beach and a child, who is throwing them back into the sea one by one, is told it will make no difference; s/he responds by throwing another starfish back into the water and saying 'it made a difference to that one'.

We all have the opportunity to make small differences and we need to challenge those who suggest this is unimportant. The more of us that choose to do so, and the more changes we each make in our lives, the greater the effect. It is clear that we all need to reduce our consumption of all types of goods. Beyond that, in making choices about different types of goods and services, I acknowledge that it is not always clear what the most environmentally sustainable solution in any given situation is – many courses of action have pros and cons. But inaction guarantees no progress, so we do our best. I have been encouraged recently by conversations with various people, by not only the changes they have already made in their lives but their interest in further steps that they could take.

Then there are those who argue that the church should not be involved in politics - often those being challenged by it. But remember where I started: with persecution. Jesus was radically political, challenging the powerful people and institutions of his day, to the extent that he was persecuted and killed for it. In our day, the climate crisis also demands that the powerful be challenged, whether they be in politics, finance, industry, the media or elsewhere. We all have a part to play in that for, unlike some people in the world, we have power to challenge. Even without speaking out or campaigning, we have power in how we choose to vote, in where we invest or spend our money, where we get our information from and how critical we are of those sources.

I started with that quotation from George MacLeod: "The great criticism of the church today is that no-one wants to persecute it!" I'm not advocating seeking persecution you'll be glad to hear, but I do think we need to continually reflect on how we recover and retain that radical edge to our faith that makes people take notice. A radical edge

that, in this Season of Creation, allows people of all faiths and none to recognise that here are people they can work with to let justice and peace flow for the good of the whole earth.