

## Readings for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

24<sup>th</sup> September 2023

### First Reading: Exodus 16:2-15

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'

Then the LORD said to Moses, 'I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.' So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, 'In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?' And Moses said, 'When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him – what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD.'

Then Moses said to Aaron, 'Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, "Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining."' And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. The LORD spoke to Moses and said, 'I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'"

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, 'What is it?' For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, 'It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.'

### Second Reading: Philippians 1:21-30

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well – since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Gospel: St Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said to his disciples: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

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

You may have seen in the news in recent days that this past week has been Climate Week in New York, an international event to drive forward climate action which takes place in association with the United Nations. During the week, the UN hosted a Climate Ambition summit urging ambition, credibility and implementation by governments, non-governmental organisations, businesses, financial institutions and civil society (i.e. everyone) in setting targets and implementing plans to address the climate crisis. Before the summit, UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, said 'Now must be the time for ambition and action...The world is watching and the planet can't wait.' It seems beyond ironic that, in this same week, our government has, at best, watered down its environmental commitments, whilst still claiming to be a world leader. It doesn't suggest much in the way of ambition or credibility and postpones implementation. I know there are different points of view on this, but I can't imagine that the watching global majority, who are already suffering the most, are enthusiastic about this back-peddalling. As Christians in this season of Creation, with its theme 'Let Justice and Peace Flow', we should ask ourselves where the justice is for them in this course of action.

Last week, Fr David reminded us that many people in the world are migrating, not through choice but through necessity, as their own lands become uninhabitable. Floods, droughts, storms and fires destroy the crops and animals of the world's poorest subsistence farmers meaning that they are unable to feed their families. The global food crisis is one of the greatest injustices in our world, and food is a topic that we will both consider today and return to next week as we come to our Harvest Thanksgiving.

In this week's readings, we hear first of the Israelites in the wilderness, migrants on a journey. The joy of their miraculous escape from slavery in Egypt was being overtaken by the realities of their current situation as supplies

started to run low. Hunger and thirst made them fearful and dying in slavery in Egypt started to look preferable to a slow starvation in the desert. They began to complain. There are many instances of the people complaining in the Bible but, on this occasion, it is not viewed negatively – we are told four times in this passage that God heard them. God knew their need and provided what was necessary for their journey. We are also told that God showed them God's glory -a sign of God's commitment to the people.

God provided enough for everyone; quails in the evening and flakes of the bread or manna in the morning. They were to gather enough but no more, according to God's instructions. As we can read, a few verses after the end of today's passage, if they were greedy, gathered too much and kept it, it turned bad and full of maggots.

God continues to provide enough food for everyone. According to UN figures for 2019, the most recent I found, enough food is produced to feed all 8 billion people in the world yet one in ten is chronically undernourished. Some people are being greedy! It's not entirely bad news. This figure for undernourishment is about half what it was in the year 2000. However, distribution is uneven; while some parts of the world have seen significant improvement, the numbers with inadequate nutrition are increasing in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South America, many of them in those places increasingly impacted by climate change. It seems unlikely that the second of the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals, which was to achieve zero hunger by 2030, will be met.

It won't surprise you that I say that, as Christians, we can't ignore this. In the passage from his letter to the Philippians, Paul calls them, and us, to live in a manner worthy of the Gospel. For Paul, following Christ was grounded in a concept called, in Greek, *koinonia*. This embraces ideas of community, sharing and mutual support. If one suffers, all suffer. It is clear from the teachings of Jesus, and from elsewhere in the letters of Paul, that this idea of community is not simply for the Christian believers, although that is where it began in the early church, but extends to the whole world, human and non-human. Therefore the suffering of others in the world should be our continual concern.

We are no more entitled to the good things of this world than anyone else, something that our Gospel reading reminds us of. The parable of the labourers in the vineyard might perhaps be better known as the parable of the generous landowner. In this parable, the landowner is commonly understood to represent God, and the labourers represent the people. Some of the labourers worked all day, others for shorter periods of time, yet all were paid the same. Is that unfair? If we are honest, we would probably say 'Yes'. Those who had worked all day clearly feel entitled to more. They see the landowner's generosity, what one commentator referred to in today's parlance as 'levelling up', as a scandalous injustice. This parable raises so many questions: where were the last labourers all day? Were they lazy? Why did the landowner keep going back to the marketplace? Why did he give equal pay to all? What will happen the next day? We don't have the answers and we should be wary of inventing theories to fill the gaps. These were day labourers, not wealthy people; the daily wage would have been enough to provide for their families but not much more. The generosity of the landowner, of God, enabled those labourers who did not have the opportunity to work all day for whatever reason, to also provide for their families. As in the reading from Exodus, God provided 'enough'. But it reverses the order of things as we tend to perceive they should be. Scripture often turns our human understanding on its head; humans excel at establishing hierarchies, but God's Kingdom is different. As it says in the last verse: 'So the last will be first, and the first will be last'. God is generous regardless of status, and fortunately does not reward us based on what we deserve, for we all fall short.

For me, the parable raises questions about our attitudes to those who don't have the same opportunities and privileges as we do. What can I do to extend opportunities to them? What can I do to make sure they have 'enough'? What does it mean for me to live a life 'in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' as Paul puts it? These are not questions with easy answers, but they are questions we should continually be returning to as we make choices in our lives. God provides enough for all and as, disciples of Jesus, we need to do all that we can to share that more equitably.

In the Lord's Prayer, our Christian family prayer, we pray 'Give us this day our daily bread'. This should not be a selfish petition for ourselves but a plea for the meeting of the needs of the whole earth, and one that we are prepared to play our part in bringing about.