

## Readings for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

15<sup>th</sup> October 2023

### First Reading: Exodus 32:1-14

When the people of Israel saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'

Aaron said to them, 'Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.' They rose early the next day, and offered burnt-offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

The LORD said to Moses, 'Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"' The LORD said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.'

But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, 'O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, "I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever."' And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

### Second Reading: Philippians 4:1-9

My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Gospel: St Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to the chief priests and Pharisees in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen.'

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

*From Rev'd David Higgon*

This week I have been puzzling over Paul's letter to the Philippians and in particular his attitude to women. In this letter he mentions by name two women, Euodia and Syntyche, women who he says have struggled as loyal companions alongside him in the work of the Gospel. Euodia and Syntyche have clearly fallen out, but it is also clear that these women are two of the church's leaders, and Paul not only commends them to the church in Phillippi. but he is calling on the church to help these women to overcome their differences and to support them in their leadership.

I find this somewhat ironic because Paul's writings have been the scriptural basis for denying women any significant role in the leadership of the church, but here he is commending them and supporting them as much as he does to his other co-workers like Timothy, Barnabas or Silas.

Paul's letter is written at a critical time in his ministry. He says that he is in chains waiting judgement; and there is a tone in the letter that suggests that the judgement may mean the death penalty. So, it is even more remarkable that Paul calls on the church in Phillippi to rejoice. He says '*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice*'. This is a man who has been at different times not only imprisoned but also stoned and beaten by the mob. These are

experiences which would leave others of us sour and bitter, but they leave Paul overflowing with joy! He goes on to say *'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'*

These words remind me of another great teacher of the Christian faith, and appropriately, it is a woman, Julian of Norwich. Julian possessed the same joyful hopefulness of Paul, she taught that we must only rejoice in our blessed saviour Jesus and trust in him for everything. She is often quoted as saying, 'all shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well'.

Julian, who after a near death illness in 1373 was said to have received 16 revelations of Divine love from Christ who appeared to her on the cross. In her first revelation, she saw in her imagination 'a little thing the quantity of a hazelnut lying in the palm of her hand, and she wondered what it was. The answer came to her 'it is all that is made'. She wondered on this because she thought this small thing would soon disappear because of its littleness, but the answer came to her, 'it lasts and will last because God's love and everything exists in the same way, because God loves it.'

It dawned on Julian that everything that exists is, 'all that is made'; a blade of grass, a cloud, a drop of water, a rock a tree, a flower, an animal, a human being. It has taken the creation of a web of relationships of the entire universe to make everything possible, even a tiny hazelnut. To Julian, everything in the cosmos exists and is held in existence because God loves it. It is as simple and as profound as that. Nothing can exist by and of itself. Everything – sun moon, stars, planets, asteroid particles, all the wonders of nature, and the uniqueness of each living being is brought into being, sustained in being, and loved in being. For Julian, all creation was understood as the overflowing expression of the divine love of God.

If we believe this, that all creation can be understood as the overflowing expression of the divine love of God, it poses questions about our destructive behaviour towards one another and towards God's creation, How can our selfish acts against God's creation of divine love be transformed so that 'all shall be well'?

I have said before that I believe that the crisis that we are facing is as much a spiritual crisis as it is an economic or environmental crisis, and that we need to address our spiritual lives as a means of healing God's creation as much as the practical things we can do to reduce our impact on the planet. If we apply Christ's words to Julian to our care for the environment, we realise that Christ *may* make all things well by teaching us how to renew what we have broken. Filled with the spirit of God we *may* make a difference in our daily efforts. Christ *can* make all things well because divine wisdom knows how to restore the earth but seeks to work through our own efforts.

Christian mystics like Julian of Norwich, have taught us the need for contemplative prayer and silent meditation. I know that for many of us contemplative prayer and silent meditation are not easy, but I don't think they require any particular skill, other than the discipline of setting time aside for God. I have always preferred the cathedrals of nature to cathedrals made of stone, and I prefer walking as an aid to prayer rather than sitting in silence, but what works for me may not work for you. I try to set aside a little time on my morning walk to silent prayer, looking on God's work of creation, stopping to listen in silence to the sounds of nature around me, and to feel the wind and often the rain on my face, and to contemplate on God's divine love as it is revealed in the natural world that surrounds us, I believe that through the practice of contemplative prayer we may discover that the earth and everything that is in it

not only reflects divine love, but it also tells us something of the beauty and turbulence of our own innermost lives. If you understand that our desire to heal the damage we do to our earth is the divine love-longing at work within us, then we will be emboldened to do so, knowing that the Holy spirit will guide us in our efforts.

The essence of this is contained in an ancient prayer of the church:

*Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your spirit and we shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth.*