

## Readings for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

5<sup>th</sup> November 2023

### First Reading: Joshua 3:7-17

The LORD said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, 'When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.'" Joshua then said to the Israelites, "Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God." Joshua said, "By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, come to rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap."

When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people. Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firmly on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.

### Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.

### Gospel: St Matthew 23:1-12

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses's seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues and to be

greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father, the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

### **A Reflection for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost**

As Bishop Mark will be preaching in Ullapool this morning, this will just be a short reflection for the newsletter.

Today's readings all have something to say about leadership. We can all find ourselves in a position of leadership at some point. There are the very obvious leaders – of governments and nations, international bodies and multinational companies; people with huge responsibilities and whose decisions and actions have very significant consequences for many people. There are the leaders of major national and regional bodies – the Bishops in our church would fall into this category. And then, towards the other end of the scale, those of us with no public position but who maybe lead a small local group, even if only once. And those of us who simply use our gifts and experience to lead someone else through something – introducing them to new workplace procedures or a new school perhaps, or teaching someone to knit.

Our Gospel is a reminder to all who lead, at any level, not to get above themselves. Good leadership is about fulfilling the role with integrity, not seeking personal glory and importance while imposing burdens on others. And, in this passage, this warning is especially directed at clergy! We are all ultimately answerable to God and the challenge we face is that God calls us to servant leadership, following Jesus' example.

But there is also a flip side to this. This passage should also be a reminder to all of us not to put our leaders on pedestals, for there is only one way off a pedestal, and that is down. They will surely disappoint at some time, for all are human and all fail. What we need to do for leaders at all levels is to pray for them (and thank you to all who pray for me), support them as we are able, and forgive them when they get things wrong. This is sometimes extremely difficult – in the realm of international politics for example, but also when we ourselves have been deeply hurt by something. It can be so much easier to criticise and complain than pray, support and forgive.

In the reading from Thessalonians, Paul is speaking about his own leadership style. His words may come across as proud and boastful to us – almost as if he is saying 'Look how good I've been' – but he wrote in a different time when it was common for many people to present themselves as good moral role models, even when they were nothing of the sort. His approach would not have seemed so odd then. As a leader, Paul has tried to lead by example and to offer encouragement and support to the young church at Thessalonica. We probably all know how much easier it is to do the right thing or to persevere with something when we are encouraged rather than criticised. He stands in sharp contrast to the scribes and pharisees in the Gospel.

In the passage from Joshua, Joshua is new to leadership. Moses has died and he has taken over to lead the people into the Promised Land. He had big shoes to fill and one of the recurring phrases in the early part of this book is 'Be

strong and very courageous' as God promised to be with him as God was with Moses. Today's passage starts with God telling Joshua 'This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel...'. This exaltation was not for Joshua himself but to show the people that God was still in control, even though the great Moses had died, and God would continue to lead the people through Joshua.

Twelve priests are appointed to go in front of the people, not because they were more important but because they were carrying the Ark of the Covenant which symbolised the power of God going before the people. The crossing of the River Jordan echoes the earlier crossing of the Red Sea; the water is only parted by God's power.

Together, these readings remind us that all true leadership comes from God and is for God, for it is God who ultimately is in control. In leadership at any level, we are called to model ourselves on the servant leadership of Jesus.

Separately, one other thing leaps out at me from the Joshua passage that always makes me very uncomfortable, but particularly in the light of current world events, and that is God saying that he will drive out the original inhabitants of the land. We cannot read this literally and need to remember that these accounts are not history as we would understand it today but stories, only written down hundreds of years after the supposed events, and often compilations of the work of several different authors. Dating from around the time of the Babylonian exile, and their spectacular failure as a nation, the people told stories of a golden age of divine favour, a time when their ancestors lived according to God's will in an idyllic land. Their context and their understanding of God was very different from our own, which is also influenced by our experience of God in the person of Jesus Christ. We need to treat such texts very carefully, bearing this in mind. It is also worth remembering that, over the centuries, many different groups and religions have considered themselves to be 'the elect' but God's invitation is open to all people.