

## Readings for the Third Sunday after Pentecost

9<sup>th</sup> June 2024

### First Reading: Genesis 3:8-15

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."

### Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

### Gospel: St Mark 3:20-35

The crowd came together again, so that Jesus and his companions could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.' And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.' And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, 'How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever

blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin' – for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

### A Reflection for the Third Sunday after Pentecost

This week the death was announced of the German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann was born in Hamburg in 1926 to a non-religious family, and grew up in a village just outside the city during the rise of National Socialism and antisemitism in 1930s Germany. At the age of 16, with World War II at its height, he was drafted into the German military and was deployed in air defence of Hamburg in 1943 when the British fire-bombed that city beyond recognition. About 40,000 people died. Remarkably, Moltmann survived the inferno, clinging to a piece of debris floating in a lake. He later described it as his first religious experience as he questioned 'God, where are you?'

Towards the end of the war, in 1945, still only aged 19 and now on the front lines, he surrendered to British troops and was sent to a prisoner of war camp in Scotland where a chaplain gave him a New Testament with Psalms. He read the Gospel of Mark and found himself drawn to the figure of Christ. He describes being found by Christ through the Gospel.

As prisoners of war, Moltmann and his fellow prisoners felt shame and loss of hope, especially as the atrocities of the concentration camps were revealed. He identified with the rejection faced by Jesus that reached its climax in his words from the Cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When he returned home, he went on to study theology at the University of Göttingen, and is widely regarded as one of the greatest theologians of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As Moltmann found, Mark's Gospel contains many examples of rejection. Tax collectors and sinners were rejected by the religious elite, John the Baptist was rejected and killed, some of those who were healed were regarded with fear and suspicion, and Jesus himself also faced increasing rejection by various groups, and ultimately was also killed.

Last week's Gospel passage from Mark ended with the Herodians and Pharisees plotting to destroy Jesus (3:6), the first overt opposition to Jesus following their debate about the Sabbath. In today's passage, we hear two further early examples of opposition in which both his sanity and his allegiance to God were challenged.

The beginning and end of this passage record disturbing encounters that Jesus had with his own family. Those, who should have been his strongest supporters, thought that he was deranged and came, twice, to restrain him. Perhaps they were concerned for his safety as he became increasingly outspoken; perhaps for their family honour for the same reason. Or perhaps they were being pressurised or manipulated by those in positions of authority. It led to Jesus' declaration that the family of God is those who do God's will, regardless of background. It is a message

of inclusivity that rejected the traditional kinship system in which family connections determined one's place in society.

In between these two incidents with his family, the scribes turned up, the theological professionals who had taken the trouble to come all the way from Jerusalem to a backwater in Galilee. They were anxious about Jesus' influence with the crowds, angry that he was challenging the traditional authority and interpretation of the Scriptures and religious practice, and, while they didn't dispute his miracles, they were alarmed by his growing popularity and assertions of divine authority. They were determined to do something, to damage his reputation and limit his influence.

We are told that Jesus responded in parables, but these were not his usual parables for teaching, rooted in everyday, often agricultural situations. These were parables that directly confronted those who opposed him and God's kingdom.

The American theologian, Ched Myers, wrote a commentary on Mark's Gospel called *Binding the Strong Man*. In it, he notes that it was common in traditional societies for the ruling class, when they felt threatened, to try to neutralise challengers by identifying them as demonic. Here, the scribes regarded themselves as God's representatives so, if they were opposed by Jesus, he must be aligned to Satan, the forces of evil that oppose God. They refer to him as having Beelzebul, the ruler of demons; they suggest that he casts out demons on the basis that it takes one to know one. Jesus responded by turning it back on them in a parable or riddle. He had come with the authority and power of God to overthrow evil; he cannot be evil himself – such self-division would inevitably be destructive.

Myers goes on to say that the twist here is that the images of 'kingdom' and 'house' he refers to also represent the religious authorities of the state and the Temple respectively. He is declaring that the Temple-state system that the scribes are part of will not be able to stand when the true Lord comes, that in fact they are the ones that are on the side of evil. Jesus will overcome all that opposes God's will, that opposition represented by 'the strong man'. Jesus is the one who can bind the strong man, naming what is evil and disempowering it. It came as a threat to the scribes.

The religious elite were captive to the way things had always been done, resisting criticism and change, and were therefore being bypassed by the grace of God. Being captive in this way is a trap we can all fall into. However, these words of impending judgment also leave open the possibility of change, the possibility that they would recognise the Holy Spirit working amongst them, something that would itself part of the Holy Spirit's transforming work.

There are times when we all face opposition or rejection in our lives. These are times when Christ draws close to us. He shares our sufferings as we share his. This is what drew Jürgen Moltmann to faith. He developed an interest in the theology of hope founded on belief in Christ's resurrection and wrote a book with that title: *Theology of Hope*. Its basic message is of God coming into the world not in some distant future time, nor indeed in the past, but as a present reality. Christ with us in our lives offering us both hope and challenge. Moltmann united the ideas of Christ's suffering with Christian hope and is quoted as saying: 'God weeps with us so that we may one day laugh with him.'