

## Readings for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

7<sup>th</sup> July 2024

### First Reading: Ezekiel 2:1-5

The heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. When I saw this, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking. He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

### Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations.

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

### Gospel: St Mark 6:1-13

Jesus came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until

you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.’ So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

### **A Reflection for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost**

I am writing this on the day of the General Election – as I need to if the postal copies are to reach their recipients before Sunday. You will be reading it after the results of that election are known. Whatever the results of the election, whether as the opinion polls predicted or not, many new MPs will be preparing to take their seats in Westminster, starting to find their way around a new place and learn about its procedures and ways of working. And the government, in the cold light of day, faced with the reality of the challenges our nation and our world face, will be starting to think about how it fulfils the promises and pledges made during the election campaign.

Just as, before the election, we all had to decide whose statements and promises we believed, who we trusted, so those who have been elected now need people around them who can advise, whom they can believe and trust. Maybe, we are fed up with politics and think ‘a plague on all your houses’ but, unless we wish for anarchy, we need these people who are prepared to step up and try, even if they sometimes make mistakes. And they need our support and our prayers as our representatives, whether they are the people of our choice or not.

When any of us are in an unfamiliar place, or facing a new challenge, the help of experts in that field can be invaluable. But in recent years, there seems to have been a failure of trust in experts. With the plethora of information on any subject available to us, we can research and make our own mind up on any topic; we can become our own ‘expert’. But, of course, this doesn’t really make us experts. An ‘expert’ is defined as someone with special skills or knowledge in a particular field. It comes from a Latin word meaning ‘to try’ or ‘to experience’; it takes time, a long time, to develop genuine expertise. And genuine experts recognise that there can often be different interpretations and different conclusions from the same information, that knowledge is built up gradually and by listening to one another.

The advent of the internet, in giving many more people a voice, is a good thing, and many people have valid experience and knowledge to share even if they are not academics or specially trained. Our difficulty now is sorting out the genuine expertise from misinformation. This is where we need to be experts.

So who do we choose to listen to? As in the election campaign, whose words do we believe? Who do we trust? Do we stick with the tried and tested, or does familiarity breed contempt? Do we leap on the latest bandwagon, nailing our colours to the new and exotic? Jesus’ reception in his hometown of Nazareth, in this week’s Gospel reading, could be interpreted either way. He grew up there, the people knew him, he was familiar. But he was also doing amazing new things and preaching a new message of God’s kingdom.

Over the last couple of weeks, our Gospel readings have focussed on revelations of Jesus’ divine power. Today, the focus turns to the prophetic role of Jesus and his followers. Although he was so much more than a prophet, here Jesus identifies himself as such. Although, the people of Nazareth were amazed by his teaching, as had been the case elsewhere previously, their response is incredulity rather than awe, and they take offence at him. This was his

own home town, his family, friends and neighbours, people whom we think should have known better. Earlier, as we heard a few weeks ago, his family had thought he was insane. Perhaps these others agreed with them.

Jesus was amazed by their lack of faith, but also seemed to think it inevitable: 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town...'. We hear something similar in today's reading from Ezekiel where God commissions Ezekiel to go to the people but warns him that many will refuse to hear what he has to say. But Jesus' power was limited by the people's disbelief. It's not that Jesus is incapable of healing those who do not have faith, but he does not force himself on those who are unwilling to accept him, and neither does he manipulate situations and events to 'prove' himself in some way, even though it must have been particularly hard for him to be rejected by those who had been closest to him.

So Jesus moved on, and he also sent out his closest twelve disciples to widen the impact of his mission, equipping them with the authority needed for this. They were sent in pairs, which gave greater weight to their teaching in a culture where two witnesses were required to attest to truth. They were to travel light and live simply, demonstrating their confidence in God's provision, and lending credibility to their message. They proclaimed repentance, healed the sick and cast out demons just as Jesus did. And they too were warned to expect opposition in some places, but they were not to be constrained by it, simply, like Jesus, to move on from where they were not welcomed.

A common theme across the New Testament is that Jesus' authority manifests itself in apparent weakness, in dependency on others, in relationships. Paul recognised this in today's reading from the second letter to the Corinthians: 'power is made perfect in weakness', something that does not align easily with conventional expectations or values. It is the paradoxical nature of God's kingdom that God's message of peace and love is open to all but is never imposed by force.

We too are called to share the Gospel message; we are sent out by Jesus, like the twelve. To do so is part of our baptismal promises, the current version of the liturgy asking: 'Will you proclaim the good news by word and deed, serving Christ in all people?' We choose to place our trust in Jesus, we recognise his 'expertise', his authority. Like Jesus, and like the disciples, we will meet a mixed reaction, experience highs and lows. There will be times when we do all the right things apparently, yet our best intentions, the things we believe God would have us do, are thwarted by obstacles and opposition. That is something that many well-intentioned parliamentary candidates found this week, and something I am sure our new government will find too as they seek to put their promises into action.

We are called to persevere as Jesus and the twelve disciples did. It was not because the people of Nazareth didn't recognise who Jesus was that they rejected him. They did; they knew him, but their view was too limited. They couldn't accept that Jesus might be more than they expected, that he might indeed be an expert on divine matters.

It can be a sobering question to ask ourselves, what view of Jesus do people see through us, as individuals and a church? Of course, we know that it is important that we carry our Christian values into what we say and do. But we should recognise and take confidence in that we too have been given Jesus' authority to carry on his mission in the world, and not let that mission be limited by our own anxieties and our fears of opposition or rejection. And we

need each other's support, prayers and encouragement to do that. We need to see the potential, the expertise, in each other and enable it to flourish.

And our new and returning MPs also need our support, prayers and encouragement if they are to flourish and become experts in that role and serve this country and the world well. We all need to see the possibilities rather than the limitations as we move forward together.