

Readings for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

25th August 2024

First Reading: Joshua 24:1-2a,14-18

Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God.

And Joshua said to all the people, 'Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.'

Then the people answered, 'Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.'

Second Reading: Ephesians 6:10-20

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Gospel: St John 6:56-69

Jesus said to the crowd: 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.' He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' But Jesus, being aware

that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

A Reflection for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

On Monday, I was at a meeting of the diocesan clergy. These meetings take place about six times a year and always include a discussion on some topic relevant to the teaching, ministry and mission of the church. This time, the topic was 'The Saints'.

We tend to think of saints as the holy few, those who have lived exemplary lives. However, in the early church, the term 'saint' applied to any baptised person, who in baptism became blessed and received eternal life. All followers of Christ were 'the saints'. One of our readings today is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians; that letter is addressed 'To the Saints who are in Ephesus ...', and we find similar references to 'the saints' in the Book of Acts and in other letters.

It was only later, from the second and third centuries, that 'saint' started to be particularly applied to the martyrs of the church and those most closely associated with the earthly life of Christ: his mother and the apostles. Later, particularly in the Middle Ages, others recognised for having lived especially faithful and holy lives, were added.

But, the original definition of a saint has not changed. We are all saints. Last year, Pope Francis wrote about 'the saints next door'; he said:

Saints are not unreachable or distant heroes, but people like us, our friends, whose starting point is the same gift we have received: baptism. Indeed, if we think about it, we have certainly met some of them, everyday saints: some righteous person, someone who lives the Christian life seriously, with simplicity ...

The ordinary, unnamed saints far outnumber the named saints of the liturgical year. All of us are on the same journey of becoming disciples, committed to following Christ as best we can.

In two of our readings today, we hear of people voicing their commitment to God. In the reading from Joshua, as Joshua approached the end of his life, he gathered the people together and reminded them that they had a choice in who to serve. Joshua declared that he and his household would serve the Lord, and the people also declared 'we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.' And, at the end of today's Gospel, we have Peter's well-known declaration of faith when challenged by Jesus: 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

This statement comes at the end of Jesus' long discourse on the subject of bread in chapter 6 of John's Gospel, which started with his feeding of the five thousand, and which has formed the Gospel readings for the last few

weeks (albeit interrupted by the Feast of the Transfiguration, and also by the Feast of St Mary for the Ullapool congregation). In last week's reading, there was a dispute about what he was saying and, at the beginning of this week's reading, his own disciples describe this teaching as 'difficult'.

The setting for this whole discourse on bread was the synagogue at Capernaum, so these were faithful people trying to live faithful lives, not those particularly ill-disposed towards Jesus but interested in what this rabbi had to say. His disciples included not only the closest twelve, but many others who were following him. Here, Jesus claimed to be the living bread that would bring eternal life, so he was claiming to be divine. Aware that they thought this difficult, that they were complaining about it, Jesus' response was along the lines of 'You haven't seen anything yet. Wait till the Ascension and you see me go back to my Father after the Resurrection'. It was all too much for many of his followers and they turned away.

But not all, not Peter, as Jesus challenged his closest twelve disciples 'what about you?'. Even though I am sure Peter's brain didn't compute, he couldn't explain it, somehow he knew that here was truth, here in Jesus was something trustworthy. And so those words 'We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God'.

As the ancient Israelites and Peter found, as the saints down the ages, named and unnamed, have found, as we find, to make a declaration of faith and our trust in God is important, but to live it out is not easy. In today's passage from Ephesians, Paul attempts to help us see all that God has given us to support us in our lives as followers of Christ, and he is clear that the strength to do so comes not from ourselves but from God. He starts: 'Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power'.

This passage is like the pre-battle speech of a military leader to encourage the troops. And the imagery is based on what would have been familiar to the original recipients of the letter – the six pieces of armour of a Roman soldier.

First is the belt of truth. There are two aspects to truth. There is the underlying truth about who God is and what God has done, a truth that is completely reliable, something that was recognised by the ancient Israelites and Peter at their best. And then there is the need to be truthful people, something that is especially important now, in an age where truth has become relative, whatever we want it to be. We need to learn to recognise truth in an age of misinformation, to be truthful and honest with ourselves, which is not always easy, and truthful with others, which can also be difficult.

Second is the breastplate of righteousness. The breastplate is the part of the armour that protected the core of the body, all the vital organs. Part of righteousness is right living, actually living a moral life, doing what we know in our hearts to be right, and not sidelining inconvenient truths. Something, perhaps, that we recognise in all those saints. God gives us the strength to live a holy life, and doing so in turn reinforces right living, like a virtuous circle.

Then come feet shod with the Gospel of peace. We are all called to share the good news, living a life of witness and speaking out when opportunities arise rather than being shy about our faith. Doing so strengthens our own faith too.

A shield is a defence that enables us to fend off attacks. The shield of faith reminds us we are protected by God and dependent on God. Knowing that God protects us enables us to face the slings and arrows that life throws at us with courage and fortitude.

A helmet protects the head, the home of our thoughts and minds, so the helmet of salvation reminds us that trust in God gives protection from doubts, anxieties and discouragement. God gives us the mental fortitude to carry on, to hope, to remain true, even when the world seems dark and chaotic, or our own lives are scary and difficult.

And finally is the sword of the Spirit, which Paul tells us is Word of God, the resource we have in the Holy Scriptures to encourage us and to guide us.

Just as Jesus challenged his twelve disciples, he challenges and keeps challenging us, he keeps stretching us. Faith is a journey of a lifetime, we always need to go a little further, to grow. Jesus knew his teaching would be difficult but he didn't promise an easy time, he promised his presence and he gives us the strength and resources to follow him. We won't always get it right, but our commitment is what matters. That is what makes us all part of the great company of saints of the past, present and future.