

Readings for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

8th September 2024

First Reading: Proverbs 22:1-2,8-9,22-23

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favour is better than silver or gold.

The rich and the poor have this in common:
the LORD is the maker of them all.

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.

Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.

Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;
for the LORD pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them.

Second Reading: James 2:1-10,14-17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Gospel: St Mark 7:24-37

Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened.' And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

A Reflection for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Rev'd David Higgon

Today our reading from James challenges us to consider very carefully how we act towards others. He says, 'What good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works?'. At the heart of this challenge, is the imperative to love our neighbours.

In recent times the threat of climate change and of global warming, has caused the church to reexamine its understanding of who our neighbour is; to ask the question of us, as people made in God's image, what should our relationship be with the rest of God's creation? In 2015 Pope Francis went a long way in answering this question when he issued his Encyclical 'Laudato Si'. This defined our neighbours as one that encompasses all living things who share our common home. In his encyclical Pope Francis advocates an approach to ecology which respects our unique place as human beings in the world, and in our relationship with our surroundings.

In the history of Christianity, Pope Francis is not the first to have challenged humankind to see their neighbours as being all the living things that they interact with. In the twelfth century St Francis responded to the world around him by seeing that every living creature was his sister, united to him with a bond of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists.

Over the centuries, there have been many others who shared this understanding of the earth as our common home that we share with all living things, and that all life need to be cherished. One such person was Gerrard Winstanley, who's anniversary of his death in 1678 falls this week. Winstanley was one of the leaders of a seventeenth century political and religious group that became known as the Diggers.

There was a period in the Seventeenth century that is known as the English Civil War or as the War of the Three Kingdoms. This was a time of great political upheaval, which culminated in the execution in 1649 of Charles 1st. It was also a time of unprecedented freedom of religious and political thought, that influenced thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, the poet John Milton, and the writer John Bunyan. Out of it grew a number of radical sects, that included the Levellers, the Ranters, Seekers, Fifth Monarchists, Muggletonians as well as the Diggers. Most of these were short lived but two survive to this day, namely the Baptists and the Quakers.

Gerrard Winstanley, one of the leaders of the Diggers, challenged the concentration of the ownership of land by the aristocracy and the gentry and agitated for woods, forests and waste land to be made accessible to the common people to be collectively cultivated. In 1649 they peaceably occupied St George's Hill outside London and began digging and planting it. This was intended to be a declaration to the world that the land was for all people not just the rich and propertied class. History remembers them today as radical political agitators, but underpinning their direct action of occupying common land, was their Christian faith. Winstanley wrote that, 'The great Creator Reason made the Earth to be a common treasury, to preserve Beasts, Birds, Fishes and Man, the lord that is to govern this creation ... Reason is this: Every single Man, Male and Female, is a perfect Creature of himself, and the same spirit that made the Globe dwells in man to govern the Globe ... He needs not that any man should teach him. For the same Anoyting that rules in the Son of man teacheth him all things'.

Winstanley referred to God as the Great Creator Reason to distinguish his understanding of God from that of the established church and the clerics, whom he believed used the name of God to justify property rights, the privileges of the gentry and the oppression of the common people. He wrote that the 'same Anoyting' given by God to Jesus Christ is available to every person and that when men and women came to understand this, they will see Christ in other creatures as well as in themselves. For Winstanley, to know nature is to know God. God's Spirit is then manifest in all living things. He referred to God as the Great Creator Reason, and for him Reason is love itself. It is Christ rising, or dwelling, in the sons and daughters of God. For me what Winstanley means by the 'Anoyting' given by God to each person and living thing, is the knowledge that we are loved accepted and cherished by God independently of what we do, and to recognise that every other person is equally loved and cherished; it is to place every person on the same footing. It calls us to see the person first, as made like you and me in the image of God and beloved, rather than seeing people by their actions and reactions. I have learned myself through the experience of being a prison chaplain, to see the person first, made in the image of God and loved by God, and not to judge them by the crime they committed that landed them in prison in the first place.

Winstanley's words are a call to cherish all the life that God created and to treat all living things with generosity and reverence.

St Francis, Winstanley and Pope Francis, all see that the love of neighbour extends to all living things, and that love is demonstrated when we respond to the needs of others, and when we seek to bring change in the way our relationships are structured.

What James calls 'works', is the action to relieve the suffering of others, the widow and the orphan. James firmly links faith with action, and what we understand as activism today is about putting the values of our faith into practice in the world. It is important that whatever form our activism takes, it needs to be firmly grounded in our faith, and on the highest principles of love, truth and justice.

We may think of activism as something for others, but the label of 'activist' is not just reserved for those who stand up against the big things, like Just Stop Oil or Christian Climate Action. Activism begins in the communities we live in, and in the wider community of living things that surround us. Essentially to be active is to be alive, it is to use our lives to give life, and the place of our activism is within our communities. Rowan Williams when he was Archbishop of Canterbury was fond of saying that 'MISSION' is engaging with God where he is already at work, and in our local communities there are plenty of opportunities to actively engage in God's work.

This week in our community we can be active by supporting the events organised by the Fair-Trade group around Fair Trade fortnight. We can join the vigil for Gaza that meets for a half hour every Saturday at the clock tower in solidarity with the people of Palestine and the call for a cease fire in Gaza. We can engage with local environmental groups, and to engage in the discussion around complex environmental issues that affect our communities. There will be a good opportunity to do this by coming along to our film and discussions on fish farms at the Ferry Terminal on Friday 13th. These are just a few ways we can bring faith and works together.

Our faith is alive and active when we change our behaviour to one that cares for and seeks to sustain God's creation, it is when we stand up to injustice and the abuse of people and of the environment; it is when we do so as an expression of love, of love for our neighbours in God's good creation.