

Readings for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

15th September 2024

First Reading: Proverbs 1:20-33

Wisdom cries out in the street;
in the squares she raises her voice.
At the busiest corner she cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?
Give heed to my reproof;
I will pour out my thoughts to you;
I will make my words known to you.
Because I have called and you refused,
have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,
and because you have ignored all my counsel
and would have none of my reproof,
I also will laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when panic strikes you,
when panic strikes you like a storm,
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
when distress and anguish come upon you.
Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;
they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.
Because they hated knowledge
and did not choose the fear of the LORD,
would have none of my counsel,
and despised all my reproof,
therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way
and be sated with their own devices.
For waywardness kills the simple,
and the complacency of fools destroys them;
but those who listen to me will be secure
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

Second Reading: James 3:1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Gospel: St Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' Jesus asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

A Reflection for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

How good are you at keeping secrets? When someone shares some good news with us but asks us to keep it secret, we do so out of respect for the person who trusted us, even if we are bursting to share it too.

In our Gospel reading today, we hear Peter, on behalf of the disciples, acknowledge Jesus as Messiah, the first time this happens in Mark's Gospel. It is immediately followed by Jesus' command not to tell anyone, to keep it a secret. It seems very strange to us and hard to understand – the best news that God's people had been awaiting for generations, and they were to say nothing.

It is what is referred to as the 'Messianic secret', something that is most evident in Mark's Gospel where a number of people are told not to say anything at different times – and they don't all keep the secret! Commentators over the centuries have speculated on why this might be, some suggesting that it might be because, as Jesus said elsewhere, his time had not yet come. Others suggest that Jesus was aware of what the consequences of his words and actions would be and wanted more time to prepare his disciples. That makes sense here, where he then starts to speak of what is to come and rebukes Peter for his lack of understanding in contradicting him. He speaks of the challenges that will face those who follow him, but also of the transforming significance of them taking up their crosses too.

In this Season of Creation, we can recognise resonances between Jesus' words here and the challenges that the world faces in the climate crisis. In the 19th century, the advances of the industrial revolution, and the building up of economic and industrial power, enabled humanity (or some of it) to transform and re-make the world. It was seen as progress, and there were undoubted benefits, but lack of knowledge and understanding also meant that it led directly to the climate chaos we face today.

We are familiar with the so-called 'natural' disasters, disasters which often owe much to human activity, the storms, floods, droughts and wild fires that seem to fill our screens with increasing frequency. There is the decrease in biodiversity in countries such as ours. A 2021 report described the UK as one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, with an almost 70% decline in the populations of mammals, birds, fish, reptiles and amphibians since 1970. We also hear of new species migrating here as climate changes. And there is the migration of people, many due to war and oppression it's true, but others leaving their traditional homelands because they can no longer survive there due to loss of natural resources, also leading to a loss of cultural heritage.

To paraphrase Jesus' words today, we have gained the world but are in grave danger of forfeiting our lives.

But it's not all bad news! Just as the industrial revolution transformed and re-made the world, albeit in ways that didn't always turn out well, much more importantly the Cross also transforms and re-makes the world and does so for good. It may be heavy, it may be difficult to carry, but it is what Jesus calls us to: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'. It's a call to change our priorities, to put Jesus and the transforming love of God first, and work together to change the world for good. And, because a cross is heavy and it has to be carried, it's something that is best done together.

Following Christ means facing up to truth, something we tend to do gradually, just as Jesus taught his disciples about what was to come gradually. Following Christ means change. It means recognising the reality of the harm that has already been done, the implications for our way of life going forward, and the impact that our actions and choices have on others across the globe and on generations to come. As we seek to follow Christ more closely, as we take up our cross, so we move from accepting the immediate rewards of an easy life to look to the long term. As

Christians, we are called to a sacrificial life, to live more simply, to give of our time, resources and energy for the good of others; our faith calls us to action, something Fr David reminded us of last week.

But our readings today remind us that what we say matters too. The second world war campaign 'Careless Talk Costs Lives' was true in more than just that scenario. In the reading from the letter of James, the writer recognises a danger to all creation from undisciplined talk. His striking image of a forest fire is something that has become all too familiar to us in recent years. Of course, it's true that forest fires have always been part of the cycle of nature, but now they are more intense, more extensive, more frequent, fanned by stronger winds and brought on by earlier droughts. James warns us that careless talk can cause similar destruction, but it is a two-edged sword. We also know the impact of deforestation if the case against it is not made strongly enough. We have a choice; we can speak up or not, just as we can act or not.

So, how we speak is also important. This passage from James always comes as a warning to all who dare to preach or teach! Talk can be constructive and lead to progress in matters of justice for all creation but, if we are to challenge others to behave more justly and live in a more sustainable way, we need to ensure that our own behaviour and actions match our words. We need to live and speak with integrity, something that James reminds us of with further images from the natural world: a fresh water spring is always fresh water; a fig tree always bears figs.

James challenges us to watch what we say, not because we shouldn't speak out – we should – but because what we say and how we say it has a huge effect on the impact of our message. We know the power of words: in the creation myths in Genesis, we read repeatedly 'And God said... And it was so.' So, in this Season of Creation, we are reminded of the need to speak out, as well as act, as advocates for all of creation.

And, if we are to speak well, we also need to listen. We need to listen to the witness testimony of those already experiencing the climate crisis, whose lives and communities have been affected or destroyed. We need to listen to the voice of the Earth itself, crying out where there is damage and destruction, where it is striving to regenerate. And we need to listen to the voice of Wisdom, as our reading from Proverbs reminds us.

In the Bible, Wisdom permeates creation and speaks with divine authority. Here, personified as a woman, Wisdom cries out in the market place, a very public place. Her words are for everyone to hear. Here, we are reminded that our everyday lives and the market place world of business and commerce are not detached from moral considerations. Seeking wisdom should be as ordinary as going shopping!

There is an urgency here in Wisdom's warnings of ignoring her message, warnings that also carry images of natural disasters. So we should heed the wisdom of our age, listen to the voices of climate scientists and indigenous peoples, and not ignore or dismiss the knowledge of experts as 'inconvenient'.

As Fr David has said before, we have a sacred responsibility towards God's good creation. That is a message we need to share, not keep secret, and do so with both wisdom and integrity.