

Readings for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

22nd September 2024

First Reading: Proverbs 31:10-31

A capable wife who can find?

She is far more precious than jewels.

The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.

She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.

She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.

She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away.

She rises while it is still night
and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant-girls.

She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.

She girds herself with strength,
and makes her arms strong.

She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.

She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.

She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.

She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson.

She makes herself coverings;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.

Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.

She makes linen garments and sells them;
she supplies the merchant with sashes.

Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.

She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

She looks well to the ways of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.

Her children rise up and call her happy;
her husband too, and he praises her:

“Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.”

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the city gates.

Second Reading: James 3:13-4:3,7-8a

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Gospel: St Mark 9:30-37

After leaving the mountain, Jesus and his disciples went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

A Reflection for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

If you were looking out of the window last Tuesday evening, you probably saw, as I did, the harvest supermoon. Supermoons occur when the moon is at its closest to the earth in its orbit, so the moon appears bigger than usual. Fortunately, it was a clear night, and it looked amazing. And this time it coincided with a partial lunar eclipse. That eclipse was in the early hours of Wednesday morning - I set my alarm and looked out briefly to see it.

It reminded me of a conversation that I had with a friend while on holiday. He had been to Canada earlier in the year to see the full solar eclipse and was enthusing about the experience. It is one of those extraordinary facts of creation that the moon is exactly the right size, and exactly the right distance from the earth, to precisely cover the sun when it comes between the two. Creation never ceases to amaze, especially if we are prepared to take the time to look.

We have now reached the fourth Sunday in the Season of Creation. On the first Sunday, Fr David spoke about the love song from the Song of Solomon that celebrates beauty with images of the natural world, and linked love between humans with love of creation and love of God. On the second Sunday, he spoke about the link between faith and action, and how our action is an expression of Jesus command to love our neighbours, those neighbours including all of God's creation. And last week, on the third Sunday of the Season, I reflected on the importance of speaking out with wisdom and how, especially in the context of creation and climate chaos, there is a need to listen to the voices of those who know, the voices of those who are most affected.

I was, therefore, struck by an article in the news this week about Somalia and the devastating effects of climate change there, which are exacerbating the ongoing civil war as people literally fight for water, sometimes at gunpoint. In 2022, Somalia suffered the worst drought in 40 years as climate change disrupts the pattern of rainfall that has guided their way of life for centuries. Crops failed and livestock died. And then, last year, there were devastating floods which washed away the precious soil, killed hundreds of people and displaced a million from their homes. A double whammy.

What we see happening in the increasingly extreme weather events across the world is what climate scientists have been predicting for several decades. Yet the Somali people cannot be held responsible for what has happened to them. It is calculated that Somalia has emitted as much carbon dioxide in the whole of the last seventy years as the United States does in just three days (Yes, days!). But one of the consequences in Somalia is that many men are taking jobs in the various militias, perpetuating conflict in that country – it is the easiest work to come by for desperate people seeing their families in danger of starvation.

Conflict between people is mentioned in two of today's readings. In our Gospel reading, the disciples have been arguing amongst themselves about who is the greatest. Jesus reminds them that whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all, and that when a little child, the least in society, is welcomed, God also is welcomed. The way of the Cross is contrasted with the way of selfish ambition. And the letter of James contrasts the so-called 'wisdom' of the selfish desires within us, which lead to conflict, over-consumption and exploitation, with the wisdom from above that is gentle, full of mercy and leads to peace.

The reading from Proverbs initially appears to use gender-stereotyped language of its time that seems unhelpful until we remember that the Bible generally portrays wisdom as a woman. This passage is about what wisdom is

like, not what just women should be like, and it contains practical wisdom for us all. It speaks of the importance of taking one's responsibilities seriously, of diligence, of caring for the land, of generosity, of dignity, of speaking out with wisdom, of kindness and the fear of God.

At the end of the passage from the letter of James, hope is offered that if we draw near to God, God will draw near to us and therefore help us to live and love for the good of all creation. Together, these passages remind us that there is an integrity in small acts of kindness and small acts of justice that reaches beyond the immediate, that builds our own spiritual resilience, that encourages others, that brings hope and joy. And that resilience, that encouragement, that hope enables us to look at bigger issues, not only to make bigger changes in our own lifestyles, but to challenge governments and big business in their responsibilities, and to campaign for the changes that will lead to a less harmful life for all.

Eleanor Sanderson, the Bishop of Hull, wrote that seeking to live a life oriented to God, for God's wisdom to be embodied in our lives, is an ancient choice. It is as revolutionary now as ever but, if followed, will have a transformational effect on environmental and justice issues. She says: a world shaped by self-sacrifice and service would be very different to one shaped by human ambition and power.

The article about Somalia, despite the tragedy there, concluded with hope. There are small signs of hope in Somalia as entrepreneurs invest in wind and solar to replace fossil fuels and provide much needed energy, and in the women in refugee camps setting up small businesses to support their families.

Earlier this year, Fr David preached a wonderful sermon about the nature of Christian hope. In it, he distinguished between hope 'for' and hope 'in'. When we hope 'for' something – an outcome, a dream – our hope can easily tip over into despair if what we hope for is disappointed. A miraculous solution to climate change might fall into this category. When we hope 'in' something – perhaps something we or others do – it is an attitude that is beyond simply optimism. We might hope in our collective willingness to change the way we live.

Christian hope is rooted in God, in repentance and in relationships. In the context of creation, hope is not for God to step in and fix everything that we have messed up – that's our responsibility. But hope is in the ultimate fulfilment of God's creation, that God's kingdom will come, confident in what God has already done in Jesus Christ. And, just as I enjoyed the sight of the supermoon and the wonder of eclipses this week, so the wonders of creation are there to constantly remind us of God's love and God's hope, and to encourage us to act and speak out in lives of service to all of creation.