

Readings for the Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

20th October 2024

First Reading: Isaiah 53:4-12

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases, yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with affliction. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. Out of his anguish he shall see; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out himself to death and was numbered with the transgressors, yet he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors.

Second Reading: Hebrews 5:1-10

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honour, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Gospel: St Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not

know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptised, you will be baptised; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

A Reflection for the Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

From Ven John Green

Words from Sunday's Gospel reading: *James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."*

If you cast your minds back just a few months ago to the General Election, all we seemed to be hearing was, "We need change!"

We were constantly being told that the government was incompetent, corrupt, heartless, un-representative, lacking in vision and up to their necks in sleaze –the list went on and on. "WE NEED CHANGE!"

We did indeed vote for change, although in numbers that only amounted to about 45% of the electorate. Nonetheless, the nation's mood seemed to pick up when the previous administration was ousted. There seemed to be hope on all sides. Many of those who'd never dream of voting Labour at least felt consolation that, at last, competent 'Grown Ups' were running the country. And among habitual Labour supporters was the hope that fourteen years of unnecessary austerity, accompanied by scapegoating, arbitrary cruelty and draconian measures against protest would quickly be addressed.

Just over a hundred days and several scandals later there is growing concern that we might simply have more of the same. That would certainly be one reason (among many) why 40% of the electorate (19 million people) didn't vote. It's as if the swelling ranks of special advisors on policy within 10 Downing Street just haven't been listening.

Jesus also talked about change but, unlike many of our politicians, he was willing to '*walk the walk*' rather than simply '*talk the talk*'! It isn't just that Jesus' teaching often seems to stand the accepted world-order on its head, it's that his whole existence, utterly dedicated to fulfilling the will of God, threw the credibility of the religious establishment into question.

Early on in Mark's Gospel, Jesus' awkward relationship with the religious leaders of his day becomes clear. Questioned about eating with tax gatherers and sinners he answers, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Later in the Gospel, when pressed by teachers of the law about not following the normal washing rituals before eating, he was scathing:

“Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

*“These people honour me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.*

They worship me in vain;

their teachings are merely human rules.’

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

So, how is it that James and John had the bare-faced cheek to ask Jesus for a favour like they did? Had they actually been listening to what Jesus taught? Surely, they must have known that Jesus didn't do sleaze!

Their request is, perhaps, even more puzzling given the background of prophecies like that from Isaiah also set to be read on Sunday. Just as it's unfair to accuse all politicians of being self-serving and corrupt, it's also unfair to see all the Jews and religious leaders of Jesus day as having abandoned the desire to serve God faithfully.

It is, of course, easy, in hindsight to understand Isaiah's words as foretelling Jesus' ministry, but it's quite likely that the prophecy was widely understood as talking of Israel's calling, as God's chosen people, to be the instrument of God's salvation to the whole world. It was through the suffering of Israel, and through its virtual death as a nation – a blameless offering for sin – that God's salvation would come to the world.

There was only one thing that stood in the way of Israel's mission – the same thing that made James and John act the way that they did; indeed, the same thing that renders our political leaders a disappointment; human nature. Scripture isn't simply the revelation of The Divine, it also reveals *us* – the struggle between good and evil, sin and righteousness that characterises the human condition.

It's easy to mock James and John for just not getting it; for not understanding that the entirety of Jesus teaching, the whole of who he was, was utterly centred on fulfilling the will of God irrespective of the cost. The challenge is that for '*James and John*' read '*John Green*' or whatever your name happens to be. The whole point of the story isn't that James and John were thick, or asleep – it's that they were human, and behaved as we behave.

Pointing the finger at others is not only easy, it can be immensely satisfying. Christian organisations can be very good at talking about how other people behave and how '*right*' behaviour might not be simply encouraged, but enforced. What we're less good at is change – especially when that change needs to begin with us.

So, where's the good news in this? For me there are three sources of hope.

First, there is the stark revelation of what we're really like that comes from the pages of scripture. Those of a similar age to me will remember the very first adverts for deodorants – the line was that only your very closest friends would have the courage and commitment to tell you that you had '*BO*' – body odour. Scripture, and especially, the testimony of Jesus pulls no punches about our shortcomings! You need to know what the problem is before you can begin to address it.

Secondly, despite our inherent inability to get on God's wavelength, God doesn't give up on us. Not only do we have the words and insights of scripture, but when we fail to comprehend that, God sends us Jesus, not simply as a

guide and exemplar but as a sign of the depth of God's love for us and for the whole of creation. Utterly incomprehensibly, as insignificant as we are in the grand scheme of things, we actually seem to matter to God.

Thirdly, there is the tradition in which we stand, the community of countless millions who have put their trust in Jesus and have found that following him, of trying to shape themselves and their aspirations on him, can be the key to real change beginning in our lives.

Looking at the example of those who aspire it's easy to become cynical and despair – what changes? Nothing!

But when we look at the example of Jesus and believers down the ages ... well ... I'll leave the final words to a ticket machine I encountered in a car park in Watford. When you put too much money in it simply said, "Change is possible!" Amen to that!