

Readings for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

24th August 2025

First Reading: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy,' for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Second Reading: Hebrews 12:18-29

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear.") But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking, for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Gospel: St Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.' But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And

ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?' When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

A Reflection for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

A feeling of inadequacy for the task to which we are called is something that affects many people, especially in ministry. I won't speak for my colleagues in the North West, but I know that I and many other clergy have such feelings when faced with the task of ministering in God's church. And it's not just clergy: we are all called to God's work; it is the ministry of all the baptised, in which clergy simply have particular tasks. And if you have been listening to Jesus' words in the Gospel readings of the past few weeks, you'll realise that the demands God places on all his followers are not insignificant. We are all called to be ready for action at all times, to be generous, to care for the poor and needy, to be the Good Samaritan, to work for justice and peace in the world, to love our neighbours as ourselves. It is no small task, and if you too were to be feeling somewhat inadequate in the face of it, then perhaps that should not be a surprise.

Today's reading from Jeremiah, in which God announces that he appointed Jeremiah to be a prophet, and the prophet's response, expressing his feelings of inadequacy for the task, are far from unique in the Bible. Protests that 'I am not the right person' are almost frequent throughout the Old and New Testaments. 'I don't know how...', 'I don't have the words...', 'I'm too young...', 'I'm not good enough...', 'You've got the wrong person...', 'How about my brother? He'd be much better...'. Even Mary, although she did not protest, did express doubt about how her commission to bear God's Son could possibly happen. Yet God called the people who uttered these words, and many others, to do his work in extraordinary ways, just as surely as he calls us today in our uncertainty.

And if we doubt the truth of this, perhaps we should consider the alternative: Periodically, we will all come across people who exude confidence – we may even envy them. But if they, or we, are too full of confidence in our own abilities, that they, or we, literally think that they, or we, are God's gift in a particular situation or ministry, then there is not any space left for God. And that is never good. And we don't have to look very far in the media to find examples of where that approach has gone horribly wrong in the church.

At some point during my training for ministry, I remember expressing to someone my nervousness about something I was doing, and I will never forget his response. He told me that, if I ever stopped feeling a bit nervous, that was the time to give up. I'm not talking here about extreme anxiety, that paralyses us and stops us from doing anything, but that nervous frisson that keeps us on our toes and makes us concentrate on what we are doing. Understood that way, a sense of inadequacy is a good thing, for it helps us to recognise our dependence on God as we seek to do God's will.

As the reading from Hebrews reminds us, we should remember who it is that calls us. 'We have not come to something that can be touched...', the writer says. The descriptions here of fire, darkness, gloom, tempest all refer to events on Mount Sinai during the time of Moses, events that often terrified the people. That was the old covenant and is in the past. Through 'Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant', the writer continues 'you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem'. The God who calls us, in all our inadequacy, is the God

of the universe; the God who is giving us, as the writer goes on to say, 'a kingdom that cannot be shaken'. There is also a warning in this passage: 'see that you do not refuse the one who is speaking'.

The calling that God makes on our lives is not like other calls on our time and resources. God's call is paramount, of everlasting significance. And so we are called to give thanks and to offer 'an acceptable worship with reverence and awe'. That brings us back full circle. To offer acceptable worship is to follow God's call in our lives, to respond to God and follow where God leads, however inadequate we feel for the tasks God puts before us.

And then, in our Gospel today, we have the account of Jesus healing the woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. We can certainly understand this as reflecting God's power to heal us physically, but we can also understand it as demonstrating that God can heal us of those things that hold us back spiritually. So God can heal the paralysing anxiety or fear that holds us back when we don't feel up to a task, when we feel overwhelmed by the enormity of what we are facing, when we don't know which way to turn. Just as the woman was 'set free from ... bondage', as Jesus puts it, so too, by trusting in him, we too can be set free from the bondage of feelings of inadequacy and despondency.

When we look at the world today, it can be only too easy to see trouble: the wars raging in many places, extremes of wealth and poverty, climate chaos and resulting tragedies. Meaningful solutions may seem insurmountable and what we can do may seem insignificant. But, as I've said many times, I firmly believe that isn't God's way. Every little counts and, even amidst these terrible situations, good things happen, God's love is shared. The nature of the difficulties we face may have changed, but it's perhaps not so different from Jesus' day when the people he was speaking to were living under brutal Roman occupation.

God calls the humble, those who will follow God's will, trusting God to provide the strength, the words, the wisdom to do his work in the world. He calls us.

God doesn't doubt us. God doesn't look at us and see our shortcomings; he sees our potential, our God-given gifts. God looks at us and sees how his grace and power might transform us; how our strengths and our weaknesses might be used to share God's love in the world, to bring God's peace and justice in the world.

As he did for Jeremiah, so God promises to be with us and to provide for us. So take courage, we are called to do God's work in God's power, not our own.