

Readings for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

21st June 2026

First Reading: Jeremiah 20:7-13

Jeremiah cried out: O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out; I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. For I hear many whispering: "Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. "Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him and take our revenge on him." But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonour will never be forgotten. O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous; you see the heart and the mind; let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.

Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.

Second Reading: Romans 6:1b-11

Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Gospel: St Matthew 10:24-39

Jesus summoned the twelve and sent them out with the following instruction: 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'

A Reflection for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

In recent months and years, it feels as if there has been an increase in the violence we see, in this country and elsewhere, particularly on the streets of our cities. In recent weeks, a number of tragic events have been used as excuses for groups of people going on the rampage, terrifying many innocent people, often those from ethnic minorities, and indulging in an orgy of destruction. This despite the pleas of families that their loss and tragedy should not lead to such behaviour. It is partly fuelled by a rhetoric that seeks to blame particular groups of people, those who are different in some way, for the ills of our society. Perpetrators of crimes are labelled 'migrant', 'illegal', 'refugee', often inaccurately, and then all those innocent others who might come from a similar background are victimised as if they are also murderers, rapists or whatever.

We need to remember that much of the violence is the action of a minority, the flames of their action fanned by those who seek to divert our attention from real issues. Some of it is an expression of the pain and anger that issues of poverty, prejudice and all types of discrimination in society are still not listened to and dealt with, despite many inquiries and reports. And, perversely, sitting alongside that, we live in a time when the right to peaceful protest is increasingly being denied and criminalised.

Such ills of society are hard to address. If there were easy answers, they would have been found long ago. But the underlying issues that lead to such difficulties often develop slowly and are easy to ignore or brush aside until it is too late. As Christians, we may, we should, ask ourselves how we should respond. We are familiar with Jesus' call to love our neighbour as ourselves, but how do we do that in practice? And it's disturbing that, when we turn to our Bibles, we also find some seemingly hard teachings of Jesus.

We have one such in today's Gospel: 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword', Jesus says – not what we usually think about! It's important to remember that this statement is not prescriptive – this is not what Jesus thinks should happen. It is only too clear from other Gospel passages, and the example of his own life, that Jesus was a man of peace. Rather, this statement is descriptive – this is what Jesus says will happen as a result of his coming. He is telling his followers that discipleship will not be an easy path. Like Jesus himself, he warns that his disciples will face opposition, persecution, suffering, even death. There will be fear and division. Family members will be set against each other. And yet, we are also told that God cares even for the smallest and apparently most insignificant details. Even a sparrow can't fall to the ground without God noticing. God cares for us so much he even knows the number of hairs on our head.

Texts like these challenge us. They remind us that we can find it difficult to keep loving God through all of life's hardships and all the world's pain. It may be a struggle, but through it all, we are assured of God's love and care for us.

Together, today's readings call us to account for the way we live out our lives as Christians. Jeremiah, the ancient prophet who sought to call the people to repentance before God for their failure to follow God's ways, laments his apparent lack of success, yet he feels compelled to keep speaking out. Towards the end of today's passage, he reminds himself that God is with him and God will, ultimately, prevail.

The reading from Romans reminds us that through Christ's death and resurrection, we are called to a new life in Christ, and we need to live up to that calling.

The Gospel reading is more hard-hitting, perhaps more real. It reminds us that following Jesus is costly. There's nothing easy about 'take up the Cross and follow me'. Discipleship is not about organising our lives as we wish and then seeing how we might fit God into that. It is the other way round; prioritising God's will, following Jesus' example in the way we live our lives, and then fitting other things around that. We should expect being a Christian to change, and to keep changing, our lives. We should expect to let go of some things in order to take up others.

This is what it means to 'take up the Cross'; this is what it means when Jesus says, 'those who lose their life for my sake will find it'. Taking up the Cross means identifying with the anger and pain of those on the margins of society, the powerless, the discriminated against. It means confronting the ignorance or fear that makes us conform to the structures and assumptions of a broken world without questioning them. It means speaking out against a rhetoric that seeks to blame others for all that is wrong in society, or indeed against unjust government policies. All those things that lie behind the violence on our streets. And it also means taking all the practical steps that are within our power. We know what they are: to challenge discrimination, to play our part in alleviating poverty, to consider the choices we make which have implications for the lives of people around the world, to hold out the hand of friendship to those who feel marginalised or excluded. None of us individually can change society, but many individual acts, however small, together can effect change.

Discipleship, following Jesus, is costly, as today's readings remind us. And, if it is costly, it is also not unreasonable to ask 'is it worth it?' Of course, you will expect me to say 'Yes, it is worth it'. But why? I came across this quotation from an American priest, Noah Van Neil, recently, which puts it well:

'When you commit to following Jesus, you are not just trying to live like him; over time, you will become like him. And to become more like him is to become more like God—not in the sense of being all-powerful or all-knowing, but in the expansiveness with which you understand, appreciate, and interact with the world. You begin to cherish everything, to radiate the peace and strength and love that comes from being in tune with the great heartbeat of the universe, even when it makes life more difficult. There is a feeling of freedom in this—of courage, of joy—that comes from attaching yourself to that ultimate reality. This, in turn, helps us face the strains and stresses and sufferings of life.'

To follow Jesus, to become more Christ-like, is good for us and good for the world, even if it is difficult. That really shouldn't surprise us! God created the world and saw that it was good.

As I said earlier, our readings today call us to account for the way we live. To live according to God's will is to live in harmony with all that God created as good and to fulfil our ultimate calling as made in God's image. And it is worth reminding ourselves of this truth and recommitting to our calling periodically, particularly when the world around appears to be increasingly chaotic.

Thomas Merton, the American monk and theologian said:

'Speak words of hope. Be human in this most inhuman of ages. Guard the image of [humanity] for it is the image of God.'