

Readings for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

13th September 2026

First Reading: Ezekiel 47:1-12

The Lord God brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there water was flowing from below the entryway of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east), and the water was flowing down from below the south side of the temple, south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east, and the water was trickling out on the south side.

Going on eastward with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits and then led me through the water, and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured one thousand and led me through the water, and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand and led me through the water, and it was up to the waist. Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. He said to me, "Mortal, have you seen this?"

Then he led me back along the bank of the river. As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on the one side and on the other. He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish once these waters reach there. It will become fresh, and everything will live where the river goes. People will stand fishing beside the sea from En-gedi to En-eghlaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing."

Second Reading: Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat, for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on slaves of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God, while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” So then, each one of us will be held accountable.

Gospel: St Matthew 18:21-35

Peter came and said to Jesus, “Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

A Reflection for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

from Rev'd Anne Macdonald

This summer we have had the unusual circumstance of visitors being pleased that it had rained when they were on holiday in the Highlands. Indeed, David told us how relieved he was to be back in the cool, damp Highlands after his trip down south. Apparently, there is a new word for seeking out wet and cool holidays: coolcations. We value warmth and dryness in our summers; for holidays, for growing food, and to lift our spirits. But it can be easy to lose sight of the importance of rain and water, living as we do here, surrounded by water, with clean drinking water available at the turn of a tap. Even though it sounds like a marketing gimmick, it might be that the idea of a ‘coolcation’ really has something to teach us.

I cannot tell you whether or not the people who prepared the theme for this year’s Season of Creation had the drought in this country in mind, but drought is a major issue in many other parts of the world. The theme for this year is focused on water: *‘Make Living Waters Flow’*. This week’s text from Ezekiel was chosen as the underpinning text for this theme. So, this week, the second week of the Season of Creation, we are going to focus on the passage from Ezekiel alone, rather than reflect on the Gospel reading, along with the Old and New Testament readings.

Ezekiel, a contemporary of Jeremiah, like Jeremiah, was a prophet, but he also had visions. For example, earlier this year we looked at his vision of the 'Dry Bones'. Ezekiel's marvellously detailed accounts of his visions are thought to be a response to being blind, as if he painted word pictures of what he saw. Here we have another incredible vision, based round a new temple, describing what God's kingdom on earth could be like if we interacted with God as God wants us to.

The time and circumstances of Ezekiel's life provide some explanation for this. Ezekiel lived at the time of the exile to Babylon. The Temple had been destroyed and many people, including Ezekiel, whose family was directly associated with the temple, were forcibly taken to Babylon. Ezekiel held strongly to the view that the Lord had enabled this destruction because the people had profaned the Lord. In spite of that, in this vision Ezekiel had a profound sense of hope for the future. As part of this, he saw a new temple arising, in a new place, not in Jerusalem on Temple Mount, but on a barren plain. A direct contrast to the lamentation and anger about the exile expressed by a contemporary psalmist in Psalm 137, which begins: 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept'. Note how water plays a background to this despair, and how Ezekiel uses water to turn despair round to hope in his vision. Others have also seen this connection to water. Two thousand years later, Saint Francis in his great hymn to creation, which we sang last week, talked of: 'Thou flowing water, pure and clear, make music for thy Lord to hear.'

At the time of Ezekiel, water was seen not only as physically essential to life, but also as a divine agent and blessing. In this vision of a new temple Ezekiel saw water flowing outwards from the temple. Previously the Temple had been seen as a place where humanity connected to God through ritual sacrifice. A holy and sacred place where the people of God made oblation for their sins and received mercy. Now Ezekiel saw a place where God's blessing pours out into God's creation, including humanity; a stream of renewal flowing from a renewed connection to God. Ezekiel did not just have visions; he was a visionary prophet. In this passage he is doing what God calls all of us to do: that is to use our God given understanding to bring about change, and build the Kingdom of God on earth. Ezekiel hoped that his listeners would turn back fully to God and build a new future.

This passage is often set in the context of the coming of the Messiah and the life that will bring: a promise for the future as understood at that time. Sometimes with the benefit of hindsight, we also link this passage to the river of life talked about in the Book of Revelation, seeking to show how this hope for the future builds throughout scripture, and comes down to us today. Carrying that hope is incredibly important, but now in this Season of Creation, we are being asked to look at this reading from another angle as well; that is as a vision of God's Creation.

The water is flowing out from the Temple and increasing in depth as the flow increases. In Ezekiel's vision the flow of the water is a measure of the prayers and worship of the people turning to God in faith. The water is an analogy for life in the spirit, but it is also a vision of a physical reality. If we walk along the riverbank with Ezekiel, we can see the wonder of God's creation. On either side of the river there are many trees, trees which are in leaf continuously and bearing fresh fruit every month, and a multitude of fish and other life. The water flows towards the 'Sea of Stagnant Waters', that is the Dead Sea, and miraculously turns it into fresh water. All of this because of the regenerative power of the water flowing from the temple, the blessing from God.

You might wonder why the salt marshes are mentioned at the end of this descriptive passage. This is a really practical point though, since, until very recently, salt was essential for preserving food. Ezekiel was talking about a future for this creation, not only about a life in the spiritual realm. The people of the Bible did not have the language we have

to talk about ecology, about eco systems, but their lives were closely connected with what was around them. Their technology did not separate them from the rest of God's creation. We too need to be careful that our technology does not prevent us from seeing what is happening. An example of this might be the food we buy; some is produced locally, some comes from the other side of the world, and most of it requires fertiliser produced using minerals from places like Ukraine. Water is a part of this chain, but it is really difficult to visualise where water is used in this chain, and whether it is a just use. This year's theme for the Season of Creation challenges us to think about such processes.

Ezekiel was speaking for his time, but the same issues he confronted continue to exist today. David talked to us last week about the crisis today in God's creation, and how God, out of his love, continues to sustain creation. David spelled out how God's creation is disfigured by sin, but how by repenting and being faithful to God we can effect change. A different time, a different crisis, but the same underlying cause and the same solution. Yes, a critical part of that response is turning to God in worship and prayer, but the response is also about practical care for the rest of creation in this life. Ezekiel's God given vision shows us that God is guiding us to seek the life of the spirit, and to live well within his creation.