Readings for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

27th September 2026

First Reading: Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-32

The word of the Lord came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins who shall die.

Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is unfair." Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed, they shall die. Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, "The way of the Lord is unfair." O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

Second Reading: Philippians 2:1-13

If, then, there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, work on your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Gospel: St Matthew 21:23-32

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and

said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’ Jesus said to them, ‘I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’ And they argued with one another, ‘If we say, “From heaven,” he will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?” But if we say, “Of human origin,” we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.’ So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’ And he said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” He answered, “I will not”; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, “I go, sir”; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They said, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.’

A Reflection for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Recently, I have been re-reading the beautiful and remarkable book, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Kimmerer is an American botanist with native American ancestry who, in this book, endeavours to reconcile her scientific training and scientific understanding of the world with the teachings of indigenous peoples and their interpretations of the world. The cover notes describe the book as ‘blending botany, Native American mythology, natural history and philosophy’. In this day and age, when the world is finally starting to recognise the considerable impact of human activity on the world, science is also awakening to the wisdom of indigenous peoples and their understanding of balance and reciprocity in natural systems, systems which include humanity as one element but an element that is no more important than the other elements that make them up.

In one chapter, she reflects on the importance of gratitude to many native peoples, and she describes the *Thanksgiving Address* of the Onondaga people who originate from the area south of Lake Ontario. The address is lengthy but, in this Season of Creation when the theme is ‘Let the Living Water Flow’, the section on water particularly caught my attention:

> We give thanks to all the waters of the world for quenching our thirst, for providing strength and nurturing life for all beings. We know its power in many forms – waterfalls and rain, mists and streams, rivers and oceans, snow and ice. We are grateful that the waters are still here and meeting their responsibility to the rest of Creation. Can we agree that water is important to our lives and bring our minds together as one to send greetings and thanks to Water? Now our minds are one.

Each petition in the address touches on a different aspect of the natural world and ends in a similar way, with a request for thanks and a statement of unity. We probably all agree that water is important to our lives, but we probably don’t think of water s having responsibility, and have we ever considered sending greetings and thanks to Water? Perhaps not; more likely we have given thanks to God for the gift of water, which is, to my mind, a similar sentiment in a different culture and tradition. But then there is that last sentence: ‘Now our minds are one.’ When we acknowledge our common dependence on something, when we give thanks for it, it suggests that we become

united in some way, with one another and with that aspect of Creation. And I suggest that when we reach that common understanding, it is harder to ignore when things go wrong, and easier to recognise that we have our part to play in maintaining the delicate balance that holds Creation together.

In today's Gospel reading, we have the parable of the Two Sons – the one who refuses but later does as asked, and the one who says he will do as asked but doesn't. The setting is a vineyard, an important symbol in the Bible of God's people and also an important environmental image. To flourish, vineyards depend on fertile soil, reliable rainfall, biodiversity … and also careful human cultivation. The success of a vineyard is an example of balance and reciprocity between human and non-human creation, working together, just as Kimmerer relates in the teaching of indigenous wisdom in her book. And it is also an example of the close inter-relationship between ecology and economics when we consider our responsibility towards the Earth, our common home, that David wrote about last week.

In this parable, working in the vineyard can be seen as representing participation in God's purposes for both human society, God's people, and for the Earth, God's creation. If we profess our faith, affirming that the Earth belongs to God, but do little to challenge the destruction that is taking place across the world, or take little action to mitigate the contribution of our lifestyles to climate change, then we are more like the second son in saying that we will do as God asks but then not doing so. But the first son's change of heart offers us hope.

Repentance, here, is more than regret; it is a transformation that leads to a change in behaviour. And every small step we take on that journey is important.

Repentance is possible, change is possible, and all of us can make a difference, but to change requires humility. Today's passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians calls on Christians to follow Christ's example of humility. Rather than pursuing our own ambitions or personal advantage, we are called to put the interests of others, and of the rest of creation, ahead of ourselves. Much of the ecological crisis that the world faces is a result of human pride and selfishness, and a view that the world's resources are there to satisfy human demand. In the past, that may have been partly though ignorance, but we can't claim that excuse now. We know the effects of the way we live; we know that those whose lifestyles have caused the least damage often suffer the greatest adverse effects. A call to humility is the opposite of this and echoes the indigenous wisdom I spoke of earlier, of the importance of balance and reciprocity with all of creation.

I am constantly being surprised, humbled and encouraged by the different ways in which members of our congregations take action to reduce their climate impact and to work to make the world a fairer and more just place for all of creation. However, there is always more we can do. New understandings, new possibilities of action that we can take, are always emerging, so I hope we can all learn to see this attitude of humility as a journey, one in which we are continually looking for opportunities to make further changes and take further action for the good of the whole Earth.

Sometimes people argue that the problem is too big and the little I can do is too small – I am sure you have heard such things said. I was enormously encouraged by the Palestinian visitors from HIRN (Hebron International Resource Network) who came to speak in Ullapool earlier in September. They are working with communities in the West Bank whose homes and livelihoods are being threatened by ongoing settlement. They said that they don't look at the big picture because it engenders despair and inaction; instead they look at what is in front of them and work with local

communities to address that. In the past 15 years or so, amongst other things, they have quietly helped restore water and electricity supplies, built schools and other community infrastructure, aided farming projects and provided higher education grants. It is possible to make a difference.

Repentance is possible; change is possible; humility is necessary! The good news is that God invites us all to rediscover our place within creation as servants entrusted with God's gifts. God calls us to actively enter God's vineyard, to care for the land, to protect the living water and to participate in God's work of renewing the Earth. Let us seize the opportunities he puts before us with humility and enthusiasm.