

Sunday Morning Worship
Readings, Reflection and Prayers 21st July



Jeremiah 23.1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

This is the word of the Lord.

Ephesians 2.11-22

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision'—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

This is the word of the Lord.

Mark 6.30-34, 53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Reflection by Ann Waizeneker

Our gospel reading this morning creates a great sense of urgency and pressing need. It helps I think to set the background to this:

Jesus had sent his twelve Apostles out in twos to preach and teach on their own for the first time, and they have come back, exhausted but excited, keen to tell him about all that they had done. On top of this, as we heard last week, the tragic news has come through of the beheading of John the Baptist by Herod. So, lots of conflicting emotions to deal with, alongside physical exhaustion.

Recognising this, Jesus takes the twelve away by boat to a quiet place for rest and refreshment; Mark tells us that they had no time even to eat, such were the crowds Jesus was by now attracting. Not easy to get away from and as soon as they come ashore again, they are besieged.

Jesus likens the people to sheep without a shepherd and in compassion begins to teach them. We then follow him to Gennesaret, where again he is mobbed by crowds, bringing their sick to be healed, wherever he goes.

So, what we get in this account from Mark, is a picture of the gathering and unstoppable momentum surrounding Jesus – the word has spread, and these desperate people, suffering under foreign (Roman) rule and with Herod as their despicable local governor, flock to receive hope, love, healing and teaching from Jesus.

For me, these descriptive passages of life around Jesus as his fame spreads, focus our thoughts on some key cornerstones of the Christian faith.

For example, how we attend to the needs of mind, body and spirit. We get a sense here of how overwhelming and uncomfortable life is for Jesus' disciples. Constant, demanding crowds, and danger – the death of John the Baptist being a case in point.

We too can feel besieged, maybe not by crowds but by competing demands on our time, even when we are retired! Here Jesus says: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while". We all need time and space to refuel and recover, mindful of what we read in

Genesis: "God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it, God rested from all the work that he had done in creation." *Gen 2.3*

The point here is to ask whether we apply to ourselves this invitation Jesus gives to his disciples. It's interesting isn't it how the invitation is worded. He doesn't say, "come and be with me", he says "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while". The encouragement is to give themselves space and solitude.

I remember when I first went on a silent retreat, there was quite a lot of anxiety among those attending at the thought of not speaking for 48 hours and doing without the company of tv, radio or phones. There was concern that this might be a lonely and depressing two days. But solitude isn't the same as loneliness and we need it from time to time. As one writer puts it, without space and solitude, we can end up living at some distance from ourselves. I understand that to mean that if we are not careful, we can allow every moment to be filled, without making time to stop, rest and catch up with ourselves. I imagine that might resonate with many of us and we might pose the question: do we make enough time in our lives not only for relaxation, but also for solitude?

In this passage Mark gives us a real feel for the sheer scale of the crowds and Jesus welcomes them all. Paul, in writing to the Ephesians, reinforces this fundamental aspect of our faith - that we are all one in Christ. He describes Jesus as a master builder who demolishes dividing walls, welcoming everyone. He refers to the major division of those times, between Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised. Today we live in an age where all round the world walls are still put up, figuratively or physically. And sadly, this still applies within the church, with divisions against those from different church traditions, against those with opposing views on biblical or moral principles.

A/B Justin Welby observed at the recent Synod meeting that "The reality of the Church as we live it is always messy. But its diversity of traditions is indispensable to the Gospel". The challenge is to recognise this and to find ways to accommodate our differences, to be the one body of Christ.

Our readings today guide us to ask Jesus to show us where the walls we erect need dismantling and what part we may have in this. I am reminded of the Serenity Prayer:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

So what can we take from all this?

Mark vividly describes the continuation of Jesus' healing ministry. He concentrates here on the cure of physical illness, but we know that healing today, as then, encompasses many other forms of disorder – those who feel alienated from the church, breakdown within families, the discouraged and despairing who have lost the capacity to hope. It is for us to reach out to them; to model the love we receive from Christ. To show that healing isn't necessarily physical, that faith and spiritual wellbeing are what sustain us. Let us offer encouragement, hope, generosity.

There is so much we can do but there will always be more. So, we mustn't lose sight of the need for refreshment and renewal for ourselves. We can't do everything but little actions make a difference. And if you don't believe that, remember this wisdom from the Dalai Lama: "if you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito"!

Prayers

Holy God out of your goodness, Jesus revealed himself as "The Good Shepherd" and supplied the needs of a great crowd. In this time of prayer we thank you for supplying all our needs and offer you our love. To the bidding "**Lord in your mercy**" please respond "**hear our prayer**"

Lord, we pray for your church throughout the world and remember Christians in countries where their beliefs make them vulnerable and in danger. We pray for divisions in the church that we may all use the love you have given us to resolve differences and to see each other as made in your image. And here at St Stephens we pray for the work of the Church in our worship and our service to the community. We thank you for our ministry team and for all those who contribute their time and resources to make this holy place alive and thriving. May we remain faithful in our daily lives and live as part of your kingdom here on earth

Silence

Lord in your mercy - **hear our prayer**

Father, we pray for world peace remembering particularly Ukraine and Israel-Palestine and hold up to you those driven to become refugees and migrants from around the world that they may be treated with compassion as nations try to resolve the problems created by their arrival. We pray for the US as they struggle to choose their next leader, and we pray for our own politicians that they have the courage to do what is right for the country and to work for peace, fairness and justice for all. And may we, Father, in our daily lives work for the common good

Silence

Lord in your mercy - **hear our prayer**

Father, we raise before you our homes and relationships for you to work in. We thank you for our local community; for those who share with us in its activities and for all who serve its varied interests. Help us to make our own contribution and to learn to be good neighbours at all times. As

the summer holidays start, we pray for families under stress, for those using the food bank, & those worried about their future. We thank you for the strength you give us to meet the needs of others & ask that you open our eyes and hearts to those around us in need of love and support

Silence

*Lord in your mercy - **hear our prayer***

Loving God we place in your hands those who are sick & ask that you ease their pain, and heal the damage they are suffering in body, mind or spirit. Be present with them through the support of friends and in the care of doctors and nurses. From our own community we pray especially for: Leon and Valda Bailey, Joyce Pringle, Ann Hunt, Anuwat Wanggane, Joan Tyson, Alan Coe, Gloria, Jack Tubby, Rob & Lucy, Roger Jones, Patricia Ash, Jason Thomson, Ryan Day, Brenda Hulland, David New, and Adrina and Alan Price. And in the silence of our own hearts, we lift before you now, those we know to be in need at this time.

Silence

*Lord in your mercy - **hear our prayer***

Father, we pray for all those who have died and thank you for their lives and what you have taught us through them. We remember with love and gratitude those whose anniversary of death falls at this time: Mary Pritchard, Alan Dugdale, Barbara Embelin, Gordon Neal, Joy Cox, David Cooper, June Fisher and Keith Mason. We pray for all who mourn, whether their loss is recent or longer term, and ask that you sustain them in their grief. May we not fear death but welcome it as the final fulfilment of all you offer us, and we thank you for the promise of eternal life.

Silence

*Lord in your mercy - **hear our prayer***

Faithful God, through these prayers we offer afresh our lives as well as our words; send us out into the world determined that each moment from now on becomes an offering of love for you.

Merciful Father,

Accept these prayers for the sake of your son,

Our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen