

PENTECOST 9C, 07082022 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Isaiah 1.1, 10-20; Psalm 50,1-8, 23-24; Hebrews 11.1-3, 8-16; Luke 12.32-40

'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. 'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. 'But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'

Today's Bible readings speak to us from a distant past, refer to an even more distant past, and then speak of a future we can scarcely imagine. Thousands of years of human history, told in stories centred on a few individuals living so many years ago; and yet they speak to our own situation today.

Chronologically, we begin with Abraham, described by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews as an example of faith. Turning to the book of Genesis at the beginning of our Bible we read that Abraham, a descendant of Noah, was called by God to take his wife Sarah and leave his ancestral lands to journey to a new land, where God would make them the ancestors of a great nation.

They obeyed, but their journey was long and hard, they didn't always behave well, and their faith was not always strong. But against all odds they eventually had their son, Isaac, whose own son was Jacob, later named Israel, from whom the Twelve Tribes of Israel were descended.

Moving forward in time we come to Isaiah, writing in the eighth century before Christ, warning the people of Israel that their religion had lost its way.

Through Isaiah God says their sacrifices, their festivals and their worship have become a hateful burden, angering God because there is no justice in the land.

I am reminded of the argument some use to explain why they don't go to church: 'All those hypocrites, sitting piously in church, pretending they're better than everyone else and going home to abuse their families, cheat on their taxes, drink and swear and all the rest of it!'

We of course would protest- that's not true! We don't pretend we're better than anyone else!

Psalm 50 echoes Isaiah's warning, threatening those whose religious practice is not reflected in their lives.

Then we hear Jesus, reassuring his little flock- of which we are members- and telling us not to be afraid because it is our Father's delight to give us the kingdom. What does that mean?

You may remember that last week we heard Jesus telling the parable of the Rich Fool; the man who decided to store his bumper crop and live a great life on the proceeds. And then God said to him- 'Ha ha, you're dead! What's the point of profit now then?'

Jesus is continuing to teach about money and possessions, about the difference between what we need and what we want. So what did he say after telling us not to be afraid?

'Sell your possessions, and give alms. For where your treasure is there your heart will be also.' Seriously? Sell my stuff and give money to the poor?

As if that wasn't challenging enough, Jesus went on to talk about his return, when God's kingdom will be made complete. How can we understand this? What is it that Jesus told us to be alert for, to stay awake and look after house like good servants?

There has been a lot of rubbish written and spoken about the Parousia, or the Rapture, or the End Times; and as we know, anyone who has claimed to know the date has been 100% wrong so far.

So what DO we know? We know that Jesus promised to return, and the earliest disciples were convinced that he would come back in their lifetimes. When he didn't, and the disciples started dying, they needed to adjust their thinking and realise that God doesn't have the same timetable as us- so we are still waiting. We live in between the Resurrection and the Return.

Why did Jesus say he'd come back? To bring in the fullness of God's kingdom. When we pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven", we are praying for the day when the world will be transformed, so it will be as God always dreamed it would be. And amazingly enough, we have a part to play in this transformation.

Here is how one writer has put it:

"Don't be afraid," Jesus assures us. Trust God, and then act sacrificially for the well-being of others. Fear is grounded in lack of faith, in our inability to experience God's future shaping our present. Filled with faith, we plant mustard seeds, unsure that they will germinate, but trusting that within the seed is a field of flowers that will bring spice to our lives and the world.

Faith opens us to deeper and wider visions of reality. It gives us greater perspective and energizes us to be God's companions in transforming the world, enabling our world to embody on earth God's heavenly dreams. It reminds us and inspires us to be the hands and feet of God, God's partners in tipping the world from death to life and hate to love."*

Now is the time to get our spiritual and ethical house in order and our values in line. The time is coming when values and actions, our relationship with God and neighbour, will trump financial success, secular power, or material consumption. God invites us to be the change we want to see in the world.

We need to be people of the future, God's future, and not defenders of the status quo. We must not let the world squeeze us into its mould, allowing our imaginations to be stifled by the limitations of what is familiar.

God is always calling us to a new thing, economically and spiritually. God calls us to alternative visions of reality and challenges us to become partners in healing the world. We need to expect great things from God and great things from ourselves.

So here is our challenge, should we choose to accept it: to become partners with God in healing the world. What an incredible privilege we have, to know that God wants us as partners! How can we possibly do that? We are fallible, short-lived, broken humans; but yet God chooses us, and Jesus teaches us, and the Holy Spirit empowers and enables us to be the people God has always dreamt we could be.

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

The Lord be with you.

*Bruce Epperly <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2022/07/adventurous-lectionary-ninth-sunday-after-pentecost-august-7-2022/>