

THE SUNDAY SUPPLEMENT

28th June 2020 – 3rd Sunday after Trinity / Proper 8

Welcome to this week's *Sunday Supplement*. For those who would like to, a service of Holy Communion is available on our YouTube channel from 7am Sunday.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMSD6j4ngi9rCe7kzY66Xfw>

The video includes an opportunity to share in the prayer for Spiritual Communion which is set out on page 4 of the *Supplement*.

TODAY'S SERVICE

Our online Eucharist today starts from Angerton, with spectacular views over Kirkby Moor down to Bank House Moor, and some powerful weather coming at speed up the Duddon Estuary. There would have been more of the service from Angerton, had it not been for the power and persistence of this same weather!

Over the last six weeks, I have recorded services in all six of the churches in the two parishes, and tasted a little of the history and spirituality of each. Now we stand on the threshold of a return to corporate worship in our buildings, as the government's restrictions are lifted from next Saturday, 4th July. We do not yet know what the exact requirements for 'Covid Secure' worship will be, but I hope that we will be able to return to the pattern of worship that applied before the lockdown, with appropriate changes.

In the meantime, I wanted to suggest using this interim period as a season for reflection on what it has meant to be a church without buildings, and what the return to church might mean. Angerton, with its unusual status as an extra-parochial place between the parishes of Kirkby Ireleth and Broughton & Duddon, seemed an appropriate place to start this. I'm only sorry that I had to retreat indoors, rather than conducting more of the service outside.

CHANGES NEXT WEEK

As has tended to be the case during the lockdown, announcements of change in principle have raced ahead of the detail required by those who have to implement the change. We are currently awaiting guidance from

the Church of England and the Diocese as to what will be necessary in order to conduct services in church.

Details of forthcoming services, including any precautionary measures or limitations, will be circulated at the earliest opportunity. Watch out for this week's *Wednesday Supplement*.

READINGS & COLLECT

Jeremiah 28:5-9

Psalm 89:1-4

Romans 6:12-end

Matthew 10:40-42

*Almighty God,
you have broken the tyranny of sin
and have sent the Spirit of your Son into our hearts
whereby we call you Father:
give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service,
that we and all creation may be brought
to the glorious liberty of the children of God;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.*

Amen.

SUNDAY MESSAGE

This message is also available as the sermon in our recorded communion service.

Our Gospel reading today concludes the story of the sending out of the twelve disciples, the beginning of which we heard several weeks ago. To recap: you'll remember that at the end of chapter 9, Jesus looks at the crowds and has compassion for them because they are "*harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*" He tells his disciples that "*The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.*"

The disciples are to be the answer to their own prayer, because Jesus sends them out, to proclaim the good news and bring healing. They are to be representatives of Jesus, doing what he has done, proclaiming the same message and performing the same works. Jesus also

instructs them to share in his poverty and homelessness, such that they take very little with them, and depend on the hospitality of others. The disciples are, in a mixture of literal and figurative ways, modelling for us what following Jesus should involve.

Finally, Jesus warns them that the message they carry will not always be welcomed, that the disciples will experience hostility, and that the good news will in fact be a cause of division, between those who accept it and those who oppose it.

There is then, a fair measure of darkness in the sending of the twelve, and one aspect of today's passage is that it is intended as an encouragement. It contains four aphorisms on the theme, 'whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and welcomes Father who sent me.' It is an absolute reassurance that those who go out like sheep among wolves will have their eternal reward. We should not allow a realistic approach to the darkness, diminish the strength of the light here.

Our society is rather more individualistic than that of First Century Israel. We do have some limited sense that you sometimes represent others, and must act accordingly. In the ancient world, however, individual identity did not have the overriding significance that it has today. If you welcomed someone into your home, there was a very real sense that you honoured, or welcomed, the family and the community from which that person came. The agent of a person, family or organisation was received as if he was the person he represented.

This is an idea we need to understand in order to appreciate fully the parable of the wicked tenants, in which the tenants kill first the slaves and then the son of the owner. On each occasion, they are slighting the owner of the vineyard. This concept is one that Jesus invokes several times in the Gospels. It's also behind the words of the ascended Jesus in Acts 9: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?". Jesus says this, because Saul has been persecuting those who come in Jesus' name.

So when Jesus says that those who receive his disciples, also receive him, he knows that his contemporary listeners will understand this in a very direct way. They will understand it even when he is gone. They will understand it in a very exciting way. When we receive the Word of God, we receive Jesus, and receive God. When we speak the Word of God to others, we should remember that we represent Jesus, and act as he would have acted.

Jesus goes on to talk about prophets, righteous people and little ones. Many has been the commentator who has tried to identify particular groups that Jesus might be referring to here. But the better view seems to be that this ordering, of Apostles, prophets, the righteous and little ones, is just a descending order of public prominence among the followers of Jesus. Jesus is saying that all those who truly follow him, from the most famous to the least, from the greatest to least, will all receive the reward that he promises. We don't need to worry about our own inadequacy.

The reference to prophets is especially significant today. In the Old Testament, prophets were people who spoke the word of God against the abuses of their own society, particularly its treatment of the poor and its refusal to acknowledge God. Prophets appear a few times in Matthew's Gospel in the context of being persecuted by those who do not like what they say. This idea that prophetic Christian witness will result in persecution is all of a piece with Jesus' warning about being sent out like sheep among wolves. Canon Angus Ritchie says of this passage that it reminds us uncomfortably of our tendency to shy away from preaching messages that alienate or scandalise. The Gospel message is scandalous: look at the way Jesus' teaching on the subject of the sabbath was received. It will sometimes offend us, including those of us who hear it regularly in church, because we do not live our lives entirely in accordance with it. Our society, into which we are called to go like sheep, definitely does not live in accordance with the Gospel and if we don't cause a little scandal and alienation, then we are preaching the world, not the Gospel. We are all deeply saturated with the standards of the day, the standards of our own society as we have perceived or learned them. Reading the newspapers (particularly those with which we don't agree) reminds us that other people have imbibed different values from the same world.

This is what the world is like: it sets up an appearance of clarity, when in fact we are often adrift. It encourages conformity, but often does so through the fear of opposition, or the use of anger.

The sort of conflict to which true prophetic teaching will give rise is exemplified in the encounter between Jeremiah and the false prophet Hananiah. This comes about because Hananiah has been preaching the imminent return of the Jewish nation from exile in Babylon. Would that this were true, responds Jeremiah. True prophets, he recalls, have always had an unpalatable message of self-criticism for the nation.

Haniah is peddling false comfort. Angus Ritchie invites us to use these passages to re-imagine Christian mission. We will always be tempted, he says, to seek security, and to shy away from messages that alienate or scandalise. But the message of Matthew chapter 10, and of Jeremiah's words to Haniah, is that truly prophetic words will make enemies as well as friends. As Paul says, we are to give up our slavery to the sort of desires whose end is death, and to become instruments of righteousness. Those who oppose righteousness will not be pleased. The world will not be pleased. Not even everyone in church will be pleased.

The Christian calling is to go out into the world in humility, to be righteous not by the standards of the world, but by God's standards. To be prophets of God's word against the world, knowing that we will alienate some. That is one way in which Christianity differs from a club, a cult or a business: our purpose is not to sell ourselves, to get as many members as we can at any cost. Our purpose is to try to find the best possible way to live together in the sight, and according to the will, of God, and to tell other people about it, so that those who will, can join us.

The conclusion of this teaching is that even those who give the least kindness (a cup of cold water) to the least among Jesus followers will be rewarded. Little ones sometimes refers to children, but here it probably means those who are young or uncertain in faith, as perhaps even the disciples still are. Perhaps as we all are. The statement seems to parallel the teaching that what you did for the least of these, you did for me, in the parable of the sheep and the goats. Jesus is saying that your righteous act does not need to be great, nor the recipient of your kindness very great, for your goodness to be rewarded. You are not going to be judged by some measure of the overall value of your works, but by the faith which gives rise, to such works as you are able to perform.

These are important lessons for us as we contemplate our return to church buildings and the resumption of public worship. Getting back into our sacred places, sharing in holy communion together, is something that we should earnestly desire. Not because it is an end in itself, but because it is a route into the truly good life. Haniah might have said, "we shall all be back in church next week". And, of course, in a sense he was right, because the Israelites did eventually return from exile and it was God's intention that they should, just as I am sure God wishes us to be back in church. But

the point about getting back should not be that we can retreat into a place of familiarity and safety, but that by doing so we find spiritual refreshment. As I explored in the Wednesday Supplement this week, an important part of coming in, to worship, is to enable us to go out again, to go in peace to love and serve the Lord, in the world outside.

The Anglican writer and mystic, Evelyn Underhill, whose commemoration fell recently on 15th June, summarised what today's readings teach us, in these words:

"The spiritual life is a stern choice. It is not a consoling retreat from the difficulties of existence; but an invitation to enter fully into that difficult existence, and there apply the Charity of God and bear the cost."

I pray that we will be soon restored to our churches and our collective worship, that we also may be fitted to make that stern choice, to enter into the existence of sheep among wolves, and apply the Charity of God.

CLOSING PRAYER

O God, whose beauty is beyond our imagining and whose power we cannot comprehend: show us your glory as far as we can grasp it, and shield us from knowing more than we can bear until we may look upon you without fear; through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Amen.



Detail from an engraving by Johann Christoph Weigel the Elder (1654-1726), Jeremiah disputing with Hananiah.

The illustration shows Jeremiah wearing the symbolic 'yoke of Babylon' which the Lord commanded him to fashion and wear (Jeremiah 27). The false prophet Hananiah breaks the yoke (Jeremiah 28:10) to symbolise the Lord's intervention, which he claims will take place within two years.

AN ACT OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNION

You may wish to set aside a space for prayer in front of a cross and/or candle, in a part of the house which is calm and comfortable.

The Act of Spiritual Communion is best used at the time of normal church services, or as a personal response after listening to a broadcast or livestreamed service.

Guidance appears in italics. You may wish to say aloud the words in bold type.

Introduction

Begin by making the sign of the cross and thinking of those who might otherwise be sitting around you in church.



**In the name of the Father,
And of the Son,
And of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

Reflection

Compassion and forgiveness belong to the Lord our God, though we have rebelled against him. Let us then renounce our wilfulness and ask his mercy by confessing our sins in penitence and faith.

**God of mercy,
we acknowledge that we are all sinners.
We turn from the wrong that we have thought
and said
and done,
and are mindful of all that we have failed to do.
For the sake of Jesus, who died for us,
forgive us for all that is past,
and help us to live each day
in the light of Christ our Lord.
Amen.**

Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy upon us, pardon and deliver us from all your sins, confirm and strengthen us in all goodness, and keep us in life eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Word of God

Read one or more passages of scripture, perhaps the readings set for the day. Today's readings can be found listed earlier in this Sunday Supplement. You may wish to read the sermon.

Prayer

Begin with the Collect. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to the needs of the world, our community, family and friends and to the prayers you ought to offer for them.

Spend time in silence to reflect on the issues raised in the readings or the sermon and apply them to your own life.

End with the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven... or

Our Father in heaven...

Prayer for Communion

This prayer may also be used at the appropriate point while watching a live or recorded service of Holy Communion.

**Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day.
Amen.**

(After the prayer of St Richard of Chichester)

Closing prayers

Father of all, we give you thanks and praise, that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home. Dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory. Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us, so we and all your children shall be free, and the whole earth live to praise your name; through Christ our Lord.

**The Lord bless us, and preserve us from all evil,
and keep us in eternal life. Amen.**