

Sunday 30 August 2020 Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

COLLECT Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray and to give more than either we desire or deserve: pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask but through the merits and mediation of 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.

FIRST READING Jeremiah 15:15-21. O LORD, you know; remember me and visit me, and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance do not take me away; know that on your account I suffer insult. Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of merrymakers, nor did I rejoice; under the weight of your hand I sat alone, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail. Therefore thus says the LORD: If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the LORD. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.

PSALM 26:1-8 R *Your love is before my eyes*; [I have walked faithfully with you]. Give judgement for me, O Lord, for I have lived with integrity; I have trusted in the Lord and have not faltered. Test me, O Lord, and try me; examine my heart and my mind. **R** For your love is before my eyes; I have walked faithfully with you. I have not sat with the worthless, nor do I consort with the deceitful. I have hated the company of evildoers; I will not sit down with the wicked. **R** I will wash my hands in innocence, O Lord, that I may go in procession round your altar, singing aloud a song of thanksgiving and recounting all your wonderful deeds. Lord, I love the house in which you dwell and the place where your glory abides. **R**

SECOND READING Romans 12:9-21. Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

GOSPEL Matthew 16:21-28. From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

POST COMMUNION God of all mercy, in this Eucharist you have set aside our sins and given us your healing: grant that we who are made whole in Christ may bring that healing to this broken world, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.” Matthew 16:23

It seems to be an acknowledged truth among workers with terminally ill patients that people who are dying sometimes need “permission” from their loved ones to die. (Not by any other than natural causes, of course.) When it is clear that they are prepared, some need to know, through word or gesture, that their leaving is acceptable.

Elsie knew that she was dying and was ready to do so. We all knew that, and by every means at her disposal, apart from the actual words, Elsie was trying to ask for permission to be allowed to pass away. Except that her husband, who adored her, refused to accept that she was dying, and his inability to face the reality of what was happening prevented Elsie from a dignified and graceful death. Her physical symptoms and the sadness of her circumstances were almost overwhelming, even for the professionals. Her husband insisted upon nursing her at home. He permitted no reference to the probability of her dying and clung to her little bit of life as though it was his own.

Eventually, of course, Elsie did die. But her passing became a silent struggle with her husband, an ending which might have been avoided if he had been able to face an incontrovertible reality with fortitude. No blame attaches to him. He loved Elsie and could not bear to be parted from her. But perhaps this helps us to understand Peter’s response to Jesus when the bad news became too much for him to bear.

By this stage of Jesus’ ministry it was clear to Peter and the other disciples that he was their Messiah, but they had yet to understand that he would not be the conquering king driving all before him and expelling Israel’s enemies from the land given them by God. When Jesus rounds on him so violently we hear echoes of his very human frustration: that Peter is still thinking in the old terms and not in the radical new way of Jesus and his rule of love, not power and vengeance.

But Peter’s response is our response. We do not want Jesus to suffer either, we do not want him to die. “God forbid it, Lord!” Peter says. But Jesus knows that God will not forbid it; God will not cause his death, but will not prevent it, because the free will given to humanity means that God, too, must watch a beloved child put to death. Jesus is as scared as any of us would be. (The serene acceptance of all that is to come is some people’s interpretation of Jesus’ response to his fate, but this belies his full humanity.) Not only does Jesus have to deal with his own feelings, but he has these underscored by Peter’s inability to understand and accept the full reality of what is to come.

Jesus did not really think Peter was Satan but simply that this title represents everything which opposes truth and is allied to worldliness, not God’s kingdom. At the same time, Jesus does not want the natural anxiety and sorrow of the situation transforming into pessimism, the canker of the soul. The sister of reality is hope in Jesus’ message today.

There is a clear choice for us here. All disciples must be prepared for the worst as well as the best: this is the reality of our vocation. We take up our responsibilities and then accept the consequences – this is mature spirituality, this is dedicated commitment. The good thing about facing reality is that it unlocks us from the prison of impotent, unending fear of unknowing, and frees us to make change, to move forward and live more fully.

Yes, it is scary at first: all freedom is frightening, because everything becomes possible when one has nothing to lose. Jesus knew this. He was prepared to risk everything and did not need Peter’s fussing, however well meant, or needy. He wanted Peter to grow up and face the truth and then accept what must come, so that he and Jesus could be free to pursue the next phase of their shared ministry. Jesus knew that it was a crucial step on the way to the disciples learning from where they would eventually find the strength to found and maintain the future Church: from his example, but also from within themselves. Facing reality, with hope, rarely disappoints when we undertake it with Christ.