

## Readings and Sermon 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity

COLLECT Almighty God, whose only Son has opened for us a new and living way into your presence: give us pure hearts and steadfast wills to worship you in spirit and in truth; 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.

FIRST READING Isaiah 35.4–7a Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.’ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water

SECOND READING James 2.1–10, 14–17 My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please,’ while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there,’ or, ‘Sit at my feet,’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

GOSPEL Mark 7.24–37 Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.’ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha,’ that is, ‘Be opened.’ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’

Sermon from Rev. Susan Williams.

Isaiah 35: 4 – 7a

James 2: 1 – 10, 14 – 17

Mark 7: 24 – end

Suppose you have a vision for the future, whether it's political, church, business, or simply for yourself. You know where, ideally, you'd like to go. You have a plan for getting there. It's a long-term plan. It's going to need commitment, cooperation, hard work. In the end, it will be worth all the sacrifice. Everyone will be better off.

But then things start to go wrong. Not with the vision – but it's taking time to achieve, and time is running out. Perhaps people are impatient: they want immediate results. Perhaps they want convincing: they want time to recognise the need and build up their trust in you and your plan. Or perhaps some unexpected emergency – an illness, a death, a pandemic, a series of devastating floods or fires – has changed everything. Now other needs seem more pressing, and place extra demands on everyone's attention, money and time.

How do you react? Do you have to abandon your cherished plan, or adjust it, not in panic but in wise realism? Do you still have faith in the dream, while making drastic changes to the programme?

Can we continue to rely on faith in God, the saviour who will put everything right? That's the vision of Isaiah, encouraging the exiles of Israel as their captivity in Babylon approaches its end. Faith – and prayer – and God's habit of working in remarkable and unexpected ways – yes, of course. We can't ever let go of faith. We need it more than ever.

But then, what about James' question 'What good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works? If someone's naked and lacks daily food, and you say to them 'Go in peace, keep warm, eat your fill – and you don't provide the means to do it, what's the good of that?' Lack of resources mean we can't help everybody. We have to choose who we help and how much we can give – but favouring the better-off, the more congenial the 'people like us' at the expense of needier people can seem like prejudice and hypocrisy. It's never easy to judge. We shan't always judge the same. We have to try though. We have to do our best.

We're not short of major crises. To take but 3: as the climate conference approaches, there's a red alert on climate change and the need for action. NOW. The pandemic – continuing pressing demands on how to balance concerns for the physical and mental health of ourselves, our families, our communities and the needs of the economy, and support for those most severely threatened. The church is threatened by the collapse of its finances, ageing congregations, and increasing demands if we're to carry out our mission. We're asked to look at new ways of organising church life. We can no longer assume that the unchurched majority (especially younger people) see us any longer as relevant, unprejudiced or trustworthy.

So it's clear that major changes in our lives are unavoidable. The way we live: the way we spend our money, are threatened. If we're old, if we've taken a privileged way of life for granted, it's going to come as all the more unwelcome. Yet God is here.

Jesus had a dream, and a mission, to declare the Kingdom of God, and make it known by word and deed, throughout Judaea. If enough people shared and joined in this dream and this mission, the Jewish people would provide an irresistible attraction for all peoples. And yes, his preaching and his reputation as a healer and worker of miracles did bring out crowds to follow him, just as they had responded to John the Baptist's call for change and repentance. But a popular leader is always in danger – suspected by those who feel their own authority, civil or religious, threatened by a rival,

especially if their values or customs are challenged. And popular support isn't always based on a shared understanding of the dream and the mission.

So Jesus knew that his time was limited. He had to get the message across to as many people as possible, so that his work could continue, with God's help, after him. He wanted to build up a company of joyful, loving, forgiving disciples, who put their trust in God, and wanted to help others, whatever the cost. That's where his main energy must be spent in the time that remained: building up the Kingdom of God.

When he withdrew over the border, out of Herod's jurisdiction, seeking privacy and peace, maybe he simply wanted rest and renewal, and time for prayer (just as he often tried to withdraw at night to pray alone). Maybe he was sheltering for a while from the forces of the different authorities that threatened him. Maybe he wanted to come to terms with what more would be asked of him. We just don't know. He didn't get his time off.

'A city set on a hill cannot be hid' he once said. 'Don't tell anyone', he'd say to people he'd healed – but they couldn't resist. No wonder word soon reached a Gentile woman. Desperate with anxiety about her daughter, she didn't care about conventional boundaries. She went straight to Jesus for help. And although he couldn't change his overall target – the lost sheep of the children of Israel – he didn't ignore that burning need and trust.

In another largely Gentile area he met another person needing help – the deaf and dumb man. He took care to communicate clearly and visually (travelling healers used similar signs) to heal the man – and incidentally showed another of Isaiah's signs of the coming of the Kingdom 'the ears of the deaf will be unstopped: the tongue of the speechless sing for joy'

So Jesus shows us how to go for the dream, and trust in God, to meet immediate needs that surround us – and above all to let ourselves be open, open to God at work in our world, whatever it demands of us.