

Monday 13 March 2023

A God who can disturb us

Readings: 2 Kings 5:1-15; Luke 4:24-30



“No prophet is ever accepted in his own country.” (Luke 4:24)

We are probably aware of the phenomenon of a youngster growing up in a certain locality, leaving home, becoming something of a celebrity and returning later to the childhood community. Invariably the local people who knew the returnee can easily have fixed ideas of how the person has developed. This can be based on assumptions founded on youthful memories and family associations. Such a belief may prevent them from being open to the person they see before them.

Something of this nature is happening in today's Gospel. Jesus returns to Nazareth, his home town, and initially impresses the people in the synagogue with his words of wisdom. This occurs in the verses preceding today's Gospel reading. However, they very quickly become enraged with him and seek to destroy him. Why? Because the God he preaches is one whose love and compassion extends to all people – not just the Jews. This arises from his references to Elijah's ministry to the widow of Zarephath and Elisha's healing of Naaman the Syrian. Neither of the beneficiaries of the prophets' ministry was Jewish. In fact, they were regarded as, at best, foreigners, or at worst, Israel's enemies.

What about us? Can we be in danger of limiting God's greatness to our restricted vision? Lent is a wonderful opportunity to open ourselves to the lavishness of God's infinite love and mercy for all people and to become people of love and mercy to all.

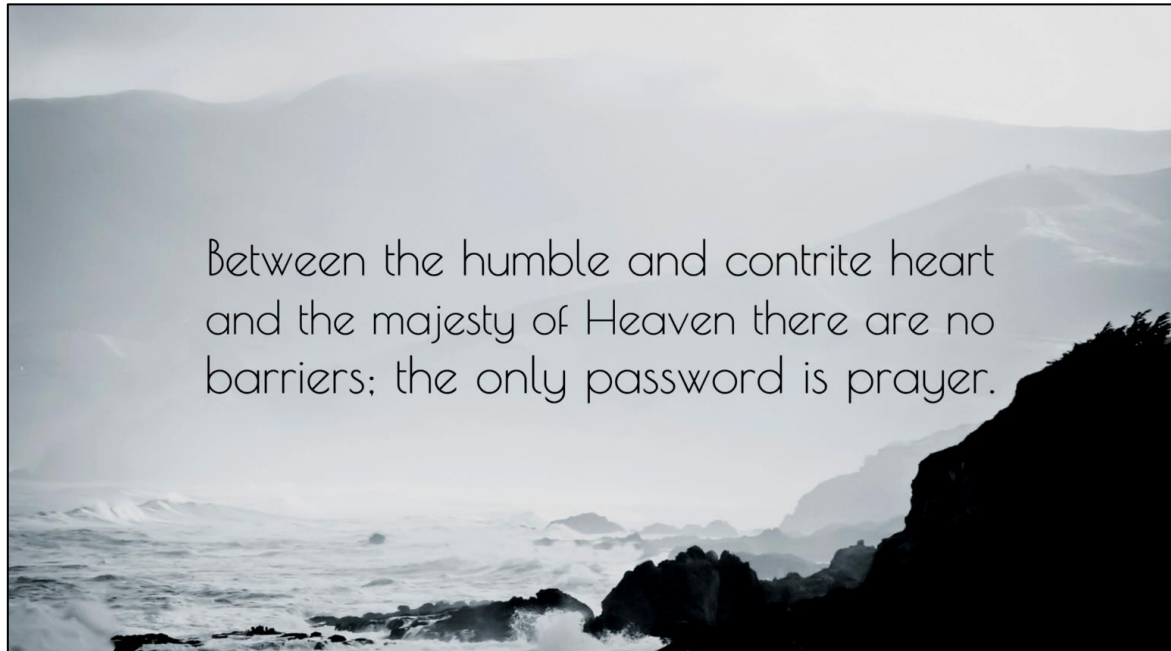
Prayer

Almighty God, you created all people and call everyone to salvation; enlarge our hearts and minds to embrace people from cultures different from our own. Give us hearts that seek unity for all people and the humility to reach out to those we fear and misunderstand. Amen.

Tuesday 14 March 2023

A demanding mandate

Readings: Daniel 3:25. 34-43; Matthew 18:21-35



"May the contrite soul, the humbled spirit be... acceptable to you." (Daniel 3:39)

Do we believe it is possible to forgive people who have seriously wronged us over many years? Nelson Mandela is an example of this possibility. After years in prison and a lifetime of suffering under South Africa's apartheid regime, he was able to walk out of his prison gates saying, "I knew that if I did not leave my bitterness and hatred behind I'd still be in prison." He knew the importance of forgiveness.

Today's Gospel shows us Peter asking Jesus about forgiveness in a legalistic way, which Jesus rejects. Jesus teaches a parable in which he looks at the spirit of forgiveness rather than rules and laws. Mercy is at the heart of Jesus' teaching. God's mercy towards us is featured in the first reading, in which Azariah pleads for mercy in utter confidence that it will be granted. We are called by Jesus to demonstrate God's mercy to all people – even those who have offended us.

However, forgiveness is not easy. If we find we cannot forgive someone for terrible wrongs inflicted on us, what can we do? We can pray for the grace to forgive. If we find we cannot do this, then maybe we can pray for the desire to forgive. This may take a long time. Nevertheless, if we persevere in prayer for the desire to forgive and for the grace of forgiveness, we can be set free from bitter resentment and experience the freedom of the children of God.

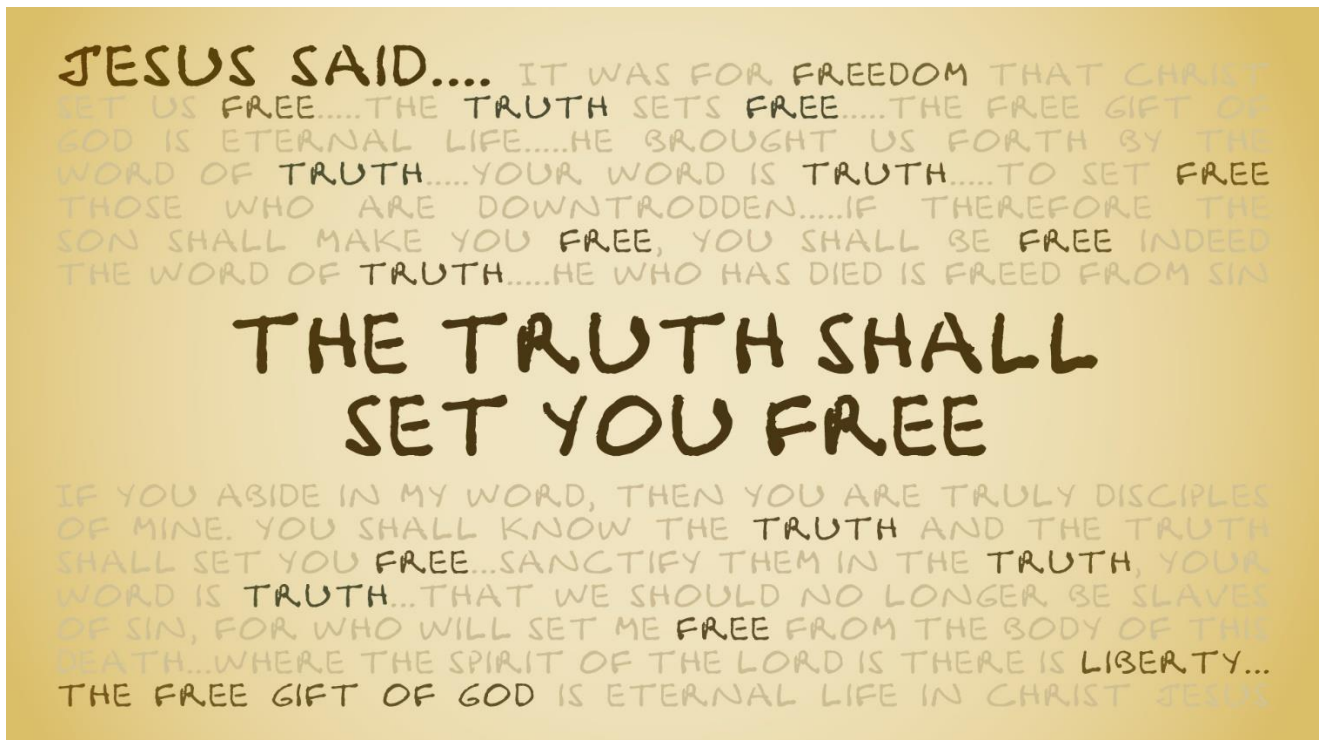
Prayer

God of love and mercy, forgive us the hardness of heart that can prevent us from forgiving others. Help us to see others as your beloved children and give us a spirit of forgiveness that will enable us to forgive others just as you have forgiven us. Amen.

Wednesday 15 March 2023

A truth that sets us free

Readings: Deuteronomy 4:1. 5-9; Matthew 5:17-19



"The man who keeps [the commandments] and teaches them will be considered great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:19)

In certain countries it is quite common to find some buildings of historic or architectural interest described as "listed". This may mean that no structural change can be made to the building but that it is possible to refurbish it. After such refurbishment the building would still be regarded as essentially the same one that existed before refurbishment.

Today's Gospel passage comes directly after Jesus had told his followers in the Sermon on the Mount that they were "the salt of the earth". He was aware that some of the Jews thought he was being unfaithful to their religion and even casting it aside in his teaching. He needed to explain to them that he himself was the fulfilment of all the prophets had foretold. God had indeed called God's people to be the salt of the earth, but the way to do this was by following Jesus in his way of living and teaching. Just as he himself was the salt of the earth and the light of the world who would give his life for all humanity, so his followers were to participate in his mission.

What about us? How might we become free from a narrow, legalistic approach to our discipleship and enter more deeply into the joys and challenges of being Christ's followers? As we put our relationship with Jesus at the centre of our lives we can find the strength and courage to embrace the challenges we may encounter on our Christian adventure.

Prayer

Holy Spirit of God, open our eyes to see your presence in unexpected places. Free us from the blindness that seeks to limit your divine activity to our own restricted vision. Give us the humility to recognise your closeness to us and to follow your guidance. Amen.

Thursday 16 March 2023

A faith that listens

Readings: Jeremiah 7:23-28; Luke 11:14-23



“He who is not with me is against me; and he who does not gather with me scatters.” (Luke 11:23)

An orchestra playing together in harmony needs the various instrumentalists to be listening to the notes they are playing themselves and also listening to each other. Otherwise there would surely be a horrible cacophony. A really good musician is one who listens intently to every sound and consequently plays beautifully.

Today's first reading highlights the importance of listening to what God is saying. Furthermore, the prophet Jeremiah presents in stark terms the consequences of not listening. Either the people listen and prosper, or fail to listen, grow stubborn and behave appallingly. An illustration of what can happen when a nation fails to listen to God is the people's reaction to Jesus in today's Gospel when he restores a man's speech. Although the people express amazement at the miracle Jesus has performed, they are incapable of recognising God in their midst. Presumably their failure to see God among them was a consequence of a way of living that had refused to listen to God over the years.

What about us? How can we live lives attuned to God, willing and open to listen to God's voice? Daily regular prayer, in which we carve out a time of silence and attentiveness to God, can help us. We know from our relationship with loved ones and friends that regular time together, in which we can enjoy just being with each other, listening and talking together, is indispensable. This is just as fundamental in our relationship with God.

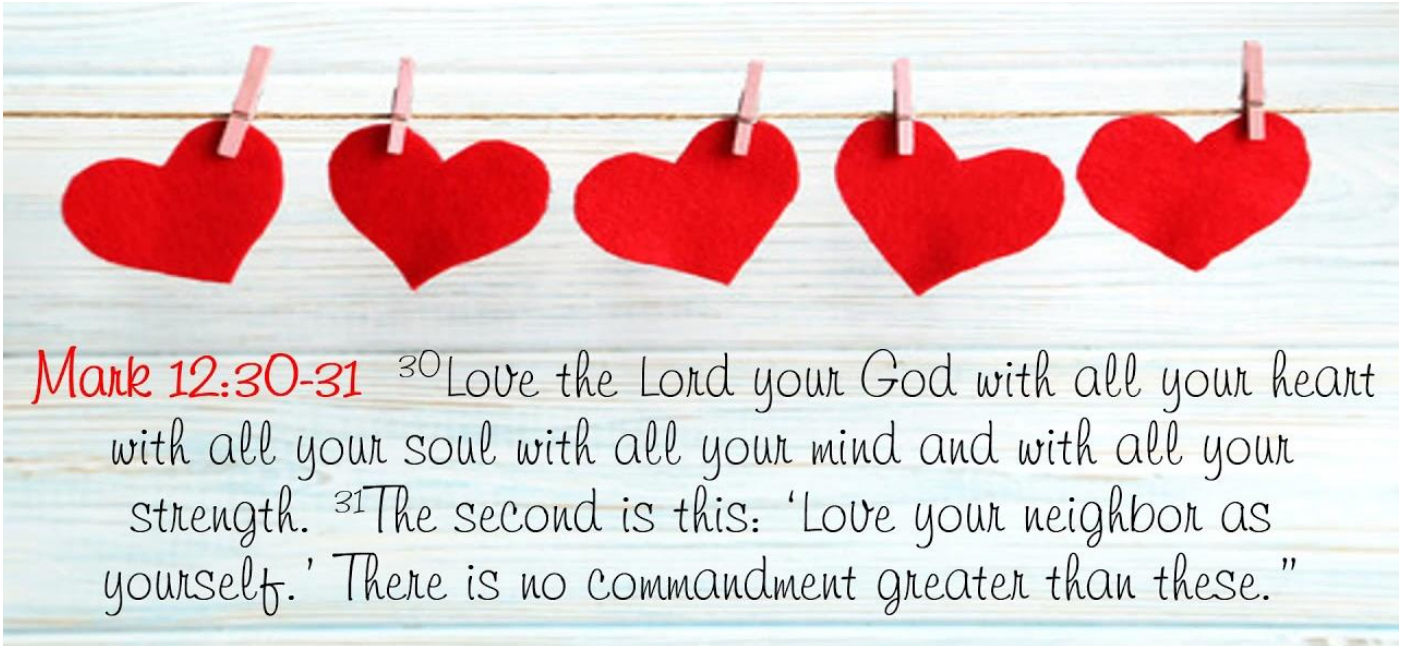
Prayer

God of love and compassion, you call us to walk in your ways; open our ears to the sound of your voice and lead us to discern your will for us. Keep us faithful to seeking you daily in moments of prayer, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Friday 17 March 2023

The greatest love story ever told

Readings: Hosea 14:2-10; Mark 12:28-34



Mark 12:30-31 ³⁰Love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul with all your mind and with all your strength. ³¹The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength." (Mark 12:30)

New parents today can find themselves feeling overwhelmed by the vast amount of information claiming to tell them how to be perfect parents raising perfect children. If they are lucky, they may find someone to remind them that love is at the heart of parenting. Good parenting is founded on love.

There were more than six hundred commandments in the Jewish Law, so the scribe in today's Gospel asks an important question. Jesus replies that the foundational law is the law of love. Today's first reading from Hosea gives us a background to this. Our love for God, one another and ourselves is a response to God's unfathomable love for us. The prophet urges his people to return to the Lord, for despite all their infidelities God continues to love them and desires only their good. God can be totally trusted and always has our best interests at heart. Furthermore, God's absolute, never-ending love for us is why we are called to love ourselves as well as our neighbours. This love is totally unconditional and cannot be earned. It is sheer gift.

If we try to imagine God's gaze at us as one of unconditional love we can be drawn into a deeper awareness of how much we are loved. If we find this difficult, we may reflect on images such as a parent gazing with love at their sleeping child. Can we see ourselves held in God's loving embrace like a small child?

Prayer

God of love and tenderness, open our eyes to your loving presence in our lives and our ears to your call to us. Give us hearts on fire with your love and help us to reflect your loving presence to the people we meet, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Saturday 18 March 2023

Empty hands

Readings: Hosea 5:15 – 6:6; Luke 18:9-14



*"[The tax collector] went home again at rights with God; [the Pharisee] did not."
(Luke 18:14)*

We have probably all seen destitute people sitting at the roadside with a bowl in front of them, maybe with handwritten signs on scraps of cardboard appealing for help. Perhaps we could keep this image in mind as we reflect on today's readings and what they might tell us about prayer.

The two central characters in today's Gospel both went to the Temple to pray. But can we really describe their actions and words as prayer? The Pharisee, filled with his own importance, evidently felt no real need of God as he articulated his perceived virtues and achievements. Conversely the tax collector knew his total need for God. He came asking God for mercy. The image of extended hands clutching an empty bowl resembles the tax collector's prayer. We come before God with empty hands. The Lord teaches us to pray and gives us the gift of himself.

What about ourselves when we pray? As we are totally dependent on God for everything, our prayer is a response to God's love for us. Thanksgiving is at the heart of prayer as we acknowledge our dependence on God. St Teresa of Avila, the great Carmelite teacher on prayer, described prayer as an intimate conversation between friends. Furthermore, she suggested that when we come to pray we remind ourselves of who we really are and whom we are speaking to – something that the tax collector in today's Gospel did, but the Pharisee failed to do.

Prayer

Loving God, open our hearts to seek you in prayer and to respond to your love poured out on us. Give us the desire to draw ever closer to you and fill us with your peace so that we might bring your peace and joy to others. Amen.