



Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 26 September 2021

READINGS

Esther 7 1-6, 9-10, 20-22; Psalm 126; James 5: 13-20; Mark 9: 38-50

Sustainable Community

Good morning and welcome to our online service. We focus on our Creation in this spring month of September, and at this time we have to focus on our scriptures to see what they say to us about our natural world and the environmental crisis in which we find ourselves.

As a veteran of many “sustainability” church programmes in which I have participated over the years, I have found, as no doubt many others have, that the Bible says very little about the natural world as a subject. You have the creation story, you hear about Noah and the animals, and many illustrations – like Jesus speaking of the lilies of the field, and the birds of the air. The one climate subject that features often is that of famine and drought. Throughout the Bible it is used as a sign of God’s displeasure, and a promise of God’s punishment for sin, and a reason for the poverty and hardship of many. I think, given the parlous state of so many of the food-producing areas of our country, drought is very familiar, and the prospect of food shortages to come are a very real threat. Is God punishing us? Perhaps, but I think we have to look at it rather more holistically. We are part of a world which is part of a universe, and as such climate threats affect everyone.

Our readings today say nothing about nature or the earth, but they do all touch on the subject of community, and if we are to save our planet from total destruction, it is vital that we look at this concept anew. Our Old Testament reading tells of how the Jewish queen Esther, who is married to the Persian king Ahasuerus, acts successfully as an intermediary between the two communities when Hamman, with the king’s support, puts in motion an action to kill all Jews. Ultimately all the Jews being saved and Hamman is executed. The passage from the letter of James appears to deal with three ad hoc subjects, as happens at the end of letters – a sort of “what have in left out?” part. It speaks about how a community comes together to pray for one who needs healing. This, plus the mention of Elijah’s prayer concerning the ending of the drought, and the need to correct those who are on the wrong path seem to indicate that the verbal aspect of interacting with God and one another in the community is an important aspect of the spiritual life. We are responsible for our prayers but we also have some choice as to what and how we speak, whether it is to God or to our fellow Christians.

The Gospel similarly deals with different themes. First, Jesus supports those who are working in his name even though they are not disciples, then he warns against causing “little ones,” be they children or new, innocent followers, to stray. After that is the rather strong dictum that you remove hands or feet of whatever it is that causes you to sin. Finally, we are to be salt – effective salt with flavour! All these tell us that

we are serving God. We are not being loyal to a team; we are not doing what suits us. We belong to a Jesus who recognises that even those who are outside may still be doing his will. We belong to Jesus so we don't hurt anyone who is still new to this. We belong to Jesus so those self-identifying things about ourselves which we love and we use to excuse anything we do – these must be abandoned if they are causing us to be less than Jesus expects of us. And finally, we are to be so wholehearted about it, -salty- that we are effective as Christians, not the rather colourless good people whose faith, but it doesn't mean any more than a weekly habit.

So how does all this relate to Climate change, sustainability and the crisis which threatens to kill a lot of people within the next decade or so unless we act now? The story from the book of Esther illustrates the disconnect between what we do and what we say. King Ahasuerus give the go ahead for the killing of Jews, but is deeply in love with his Jewish wife. What was he thinking? It's like us who recycle our milk cartons but spend fortunes on the most unrecyclable stuff on the planet – our clothes. We install solar panels but buy huge cars every four years which pour carbon into the atmosphere and create bigger and bigger scrapheaps every month. Young Grethe Thunberg is the Esther in this situation – the most memorable being her travelling to New York in a boat similar to that used by her Viking ancestors and allowed her to be true to her principles of no flying in polluting aircraft. That is what adherence to principles looks like. If we are going to save the planet we are going to have to totally re-think our lives and economy, an extremely disruptive change. We don't want to do that. It would cost too much.

The letter of James tells us that we come together as the community of Jesus to pray for the sick and to tell one another the truth. Laying hands on people as well as praying for them when they are ill does two things. It involves our speech – we give expression to our concern, but we also touch. We reach out and make physical contact. If we tell one another of our church community the truth, we are not standing on the outside, being polite, we are getting involved, with the very real danger of upsetting the smooth surface of urbane living. We are expected to be totally engaged in the lives of our community, we make trouble. Not the destructive trouble of some activism, but a reforming, “cleaning up” type of concern. If we are going to save the planet, we will have to look behind the superficial spin where for example, oil companies put money into a wildlife park as a sign of their concern, in the meantime their production carries on as usual. No, reversing climate change is going to demand revolutionary change, where our values are turned upside down, where economies as we know them will have to be deliberately dismantled, and people cared for while their jobs vanish and new ways of relating to the world are developed. This is as drastic as removing an eye or a foot or a hand. As I have already said, few people are prepared to do this, and for very good reason. But we actually have very little choice if our grandchildren are to have any hope of a life where water, agriculture, and climate will be enough for them to survive into adult life.

Appertaining to climate change, in our Gospel we are reminded that the first people to bring our attention to climate issues were not the “in” crowd in our churches but the hippie types in the 60's and 70's. While the civilized Christian world was spreading the gospel with big churches and complex plants and great missionary ventures overseas – and good people WERE feeding the poor through many mega Christian organisations, but the actual prophetic role was inadvertently carried by the barefoot girls and long-haired boys who dropped out of the driven progress of successful economic life. And when Jesus warns us not to hurt “little ones” is he thinking of our youngsters who are caught up in the demands of “progressive” life with consumerism the only badge of success? Current scientific wisdom is telling us we need to get away from huge mono-culture mielie farms and vast dairy herds which chemically shape our land to provide these products, and should revert to what our rural ancestors used to do. Regenerative agriculture means rebuilding the earth with different crops – including many forgotten indigenous ones, on the same piece of land, so one crop gives way to the next in season, and each crop and various animals fertilise and revitalize

our soil so that we are fed with food nourished by God's earth and not the plastic empty food with fast growth chemicals and our animals with fast growth hormones which don't do much more than quieten empty stomachs but feed no one. This is a sort of agricultural "salt" which has the flavour Jesus talks about. If the new distribution of land act the government is considering is truly for the good of the people, and land is treated with the respect it deserves, then work will be extremely demanding. Big farmers cannot depend on what has always been done. Water will have to be managed. Small landholders can no longer overgraze the little plots with goats and chickens because that's how they have always survived. The whole thing will have to be re-thought, responsibly managed or our country will be a wasteland. High temperatures – largely caused by industrial nations far away, will mean that the dry areas which now include the Eastern Cape and part of the Free state as well as the karoo, will spread further, fires and floods will become frequent, and vast numbers of refugees all over our continent will roam looking for water and food.

It doesn't have to be that way. The science is there, willing people to lead and help are all over the world. The question is, have we the courage of a queen Esther, the willingness to get involved as James instructed, and are we truly the salt of the earth? God loves the world God created and does not want to see it destroyed. God wants to decide when the end of the world will come, not to watch us destroying it ourselves. If we admit our apathy, take responsibility and truly listen to what God is saying about Climate Change both in and outside our churches, we can be saved. But there is no time to wait, and the price will be high. But it will be well worth it.