



# *Eighth Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Revd Margaret Place*



Sunday 18 July 2021

### READINGS

2 Samuel 7: 1-14a; Psalm 89: 20-37; Ephesians 2: 11-22; Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

## *Where next?*

Our readings this morning all have one thing in common. They all represent a break, where the narrative flow has reached a point and things reach a point where they stop. I think we know that feeling, where one project or life stage or event has come to an end and we have a short time to assess before moving on. Our readings all have this feeling.

David has reached the stage where he has established Israel as a nation. All her enemies are conquered and she is at peace. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, it seems that he has reached a point with them where they are no longer the gentile adherents of a Jewish sect, but in Christ have become heirs to the promises of God themselves, in their own right.

In the case of our Gospel, this stop is a temporary one. Jesus is longing to get away with his disciples, but the crowds won't let him. The missing part tells the story of the feeding of the 5000. After this, Jesus sends his disciples ahead of him across the lake while he goes away to pray. He catches up with the disciples by walking on the water during a very strong, dangerous wind. Jesus hears their cries, gets into the boat with them, and the wind dies down. Then when they arrive at Gennesaret, he is spotted and word goes out throughout the whole region and before you know it, he is fully involved in healing and teaching. Somehow, the much-needed break with the disciples is not going to happen, and Jesus himself could only snatch time to pray after sending the disciples away.

Whenever we reach those breaks, there is always the question, "Where next?" With David, he wanted to build a temple fit for the God who had given him all those victories. But God said no. Through Nathan, David was told that God had been with the children of Israel throughout their sojourn in the desert, during the times of the Judges, and with David in all his battles. In this way, God had now created the nation of Israel and David was its king. God promises that David's family would always reign in Israel, but it was not for David to build the temple. One of his sons would do so. God had done everything for David and God did not want David to build God's temple. David had his plans, but God said "no".

Paul on the other hand was quite clear where the Ephesians were headed. They had reached a place where they had become part of the body of Christ, and they could accept themselves as equal to any other. While they were not Jews, "the circumcised," they were - in Christ. Paul's metaphors to illustrate what he means, make us see a similar process to the way God spoke to the David. Over time, Christ has

united all people in himself. He has created them to be “fellow citizens”, of a Christian “nation” if you like, but they are also of the “household” of God, a household or family built on the foundations laid by the apostles. And now they are to become the Temple of God, and God is in the process of building them up to become the complete temple – one where God dwells and is manifest. The rest of the Epistle is dedicated to instructing the Ephesians as to how this temple will be built and what goes into a lifestyle which truly reflects God’s presence.

It appears Jesus was going to do something similar with his disciples. They were reporting back to him all the ministry they had done, but there were so many people around, Jesus decided “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” But they never got the chance to. The people found them, and we have the feeding of the 5000 after a day’s preaching. Jesus sent them ahead, as we have seen, but as soon as they get out of the boat at the other side, the crowds find them again, and Jesus has many who needed healing appealing to him.

So with each of these situations, there is a break in the smooth narrative. And I’m sure we can all look back on our own lives and remember when we reached the end of one stage and moved to another. Much of what we see in our scripture reading applies to us. There comes a time when our lives have gone well, where we have achieved what we want, and we plan to go further, but somehow, God uses circumstances, people or something, to say “NO.” We have to stop, and, hard as it is, we have to let go. Someone else is going to carry on.

Like Paul, sometimes we reach a certain point, and we have to continue to build up what we began. This can be difficult, because the act of building is different from developing. Building, starting from scratch, has all the excitement of novelty. You are in new territory and your successes are exciting, and your setbacks are challenges, and when you have finally got to where you need to be, you can’t stop. Now you have to change focus, and the more mundane tasks of setting up routines and seeing that things keep going and keeping things up to scratch. This is more difficult because it lacks the thrill of the new, and often those who worked alongside you when it was all frontline stuff, still need to be motivated and in some cases, disciplined, and the dullness of the routine has to be managed all the time. As Paul never stopped, so God requires us to keep going and gives us stamina and insight to carry on.

And sometimes we are so caught up in emergencies that we can’t stop. We are called upon to dig deep, physically, emotionally and intellectually to continue to meet demands that are constantly made upon us. Any break we can get is, like Jesus took to pray, a few hours or a quick weekend, and then we are in the thick of things again. Sometimes it feels there is no end to what is being asked of us, and we have no choice but to carry on. There is no time to be creative or to solve problems. You just keep meeting needs.

I think all of these are more than just situations, but they can be seen as approaches to the issues we are facing at the moment. (And in the current violence, we are truly in a time where we have to stop and think). In each of the scenarios, God is asking for a particular response. With the increased roll-out of vaccines, we may begin to see the pandemic coming under control, and the current horrific spike in infections should teach us in no uncertain terms that vaccination is only way to go. So when we begin to see the end of the pandemic phase in our history, and end which we hope will be final sometime around the end of next year or the middle of the following one. What is God going to say to us? Is he going to say “no” to our plans for “getting back to normal”? Is God going to shift us from the survival mode we have been in for some time and show us a new, more disciplined, way of building a new society? Who among us will just have to keep going and not stop because they are dealing with one crisis after another? Are we going to have such crises?

And the other two big things that need our attention - what is God saying to us now about the huge poverty in our land? Does “no” to our current lifestyle have implications for our poorer brothers and sisters? Are we tasked with the huge job of building up our land, structure by structure, and cleaning one bit of corruption after another? Will we be required to constantly be feeding the hungry as we have been doing for decades, with no break?

And what will God be asking of us as we tackle climate change. Here we have about 9 years to get it right, otherwise most of our country will look like Namibia, and food and water will be the cause of the next lot of riots and mob anger. We won't be able to import what we need, because everyone else will be facing similar shortages. So where will God be saying “no”? What building up will be required from us? It goes without saying that we have no time to think and consider and discuss. Action must happen now, and it's to be hoped that Jesus is walking alongside us on the stormy waters of climate change. The boat of our environment is struggling against very strong winds, and we cannot stop rowing for an instant.

However hard this may seem, and in the weeks and months ahead we must take our time of self-imposed isolation (until we have all been vaccinated) to think through what God is going to want of us. We will be moving into a different world – one where we will be sorely missing some dear friends, family members and helpful leaders and guides. We will be two to three years older, and there will be much cleaning up to be done. Whatever is needed, let us remember, that we are Christ's people, and as the Body of Christ, we can depend on his leadership, help, support and inspiration. As God promised David in the Psalm 89 set for today:

<sup>30</sup> *If (David's) sons forsake my law and do not follow my statutes*

<sup>31</sup> *if they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands,*

<sup>32</sup> *I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging;*

<sup>33</sup> *but I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness.*

<sup>34</sup> *I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered.*

This is God's world and we are God's temple. We are totally subject to God's will. But the God who came to us in Jesus will never leave us. We will be called to account for our sins, and will have to deal with the costs of that sin's consequences, but we do so knowing that the God who made us will never leave us. Let us go forward with courage.