

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

1 October, 2006

1. **The little letter of James is powerful in its instructions** about how to live as a disciple. In just a paragraph today we have a lesson on prayer.
2. **Who should pray:** the suffering, the cheerful, the sick, the faithful, the sinful, the righteous (James 9.38-50). In fact everyone for we will not grow spiritually if we neglect listening and speaking to God and developing an intimate relationship with him through prayer. God accepts us and loves us as we are but his intention is not that we stay as we are. He wants us to pray because prayer changes situations, changes people, changes us.
3. **Does prayer work?** James asserts that it does: the Lord will raise up the sick, forgive sins, bring healing (James 5. 15-16). James refers to 1 Kings 18 when God answered Elijah's prayer for rain. We can be sceptical about prayer but the gospel for today reinforces our belief in the power of Jesus' name. Mark 9. 38-50 tells of an exorcist who was not a disciple of Jesus casting out demons in the name of Jesus bringing healing and change because of the prayer in Jesus' name. God desires that all should live and so in prayer we tap into the will of God to bring reconciliation and wholeness to all creation.
4. **Pray for one another;** intercessory prayer is powerful and effective as illustrated in the story of Esther (Esther 7.1-6, 9-10; 9.20-22). Righteous Esther prays for her people, the Jews in captivity in Persia. God is not in this story but it is an illustration of the power of petition when a righteous person begs the king for life for others. James says in ch 4.2 'You do not have because you do not ask'. Asking is an act of humility and a recognition of our dependence on the grace of God to give us what we cannot provide ourselves. God is willing to give and we need to be humble enough to ask.
5. **Grace is letting God do things through us** It requires us to be absolutely trusting in the Lord rather than worrying or reasoning. If we believe that every good thing comes by the goodness of God, then we can ask with confidence and then give thanks and praise.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
8 October, 2006

1. **In Jesus' day, the law allowed for divorce**, so we don't know why the Pharisees asked Jesus about the legality of divorce in Mark 10.2-16. His answer did not denounce divorce but does declare it to be contrary to the ideal of lifelong marriage as God's intention.
2. **Christians today are divided** over the question of divorce although there have been shifts in the Church's attitude to divorce in the last few decades. Many people will remember the times of alienation of divorced people from the church and the bitterness of those who felt that the Church was unforgiving and lacking in understanding. It is more common now for people to divorce without social or religious stigma and discrimination. We more commonly recognize the failure of marriage from a variety of causes—incompatibility, unhealthy relationships, growing apart, different expectations, financial pressure and so on. Many now feel it is actually Christian love to call an end to marriages that no longer are mutually supportive and upbuilding of the partners.
3. **Nevertheless, the rate of failure of marriage** is a concern. We do have a Christian view of marriage which people marrying in a Christian ceremony need to understand. The aim of marriage is unity yet not a oneness which is cloying or oppressive. This is a unity which upbuilds the other; where each fosters creativity and individuality in the other; where each is concerned for the growth and development into maturity of the other without diminishing their own growth; where love and loving behaviour are fostered; where they look outwards together to be partners in the work of the kingdom of God and not selfishly inward.
4. **Even in Genesis** we see the first couple soon sinking into division and blame. On the contrary, Christian marriage has a focus of unity, faithfulness, forgiveness and obedience to God - "May God enable us to grow in love together" (APBA p. 650). A Christian marriage is one which gives space for God's grace, Jesus' love and the Holy Spirit's strength. As Christians we need to be supportive of marriage, but where it cannot fulfil its purpose we need to support those who feel it best to part.

TWENTY -FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
29 October, 2006

1. **The problem of undeserved suffering vexes people in every generation.** The Book of Job has commonly been supposed to give an answer to, 'How can injustices suffered by humans be reconciled with divine justice?' . However, it fails to solve the problem, just as any attempt to give a rational explanation for the problem of suffering fails. *The Problem of Pain* by C.S. Lewis and *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People* are more recent books on the same subject, one of the most difficult theological questions.
2. **In the prologue of the Book of Job** it is explained that Job's sufferings were imposed at the behest of Satan to test the genuineness of Job's piety. Throughout the story, the argument goes on: if God is just then Job must have sinned; but if Job did not sin then God must be unjust; or suffering may be to warn or discipline people. None of these approaches is adequate. We cannot justify the ways of God to humankind. And this is what Job himself realizes. Job 42.1-6, 10-17 from the epilogue contains Job's confession that God's ways are unfathomable and his repentance of his ignorance and presumption in questioning God and charging God with injustice. He had caught a glimpse of God and he realized that God's action is beyond human comprehension.
3. **In Jesus we see that God does not want suffering.** (Mark 10.46-52) Bartimaeus's faith and perseverance are rewarded sympathetically by Jesus. Bartimaeus becomes a disciple because he too has caught a glimpse of God, who wants to bring sight and life to everyone.
4. **There is a great deal of suffering in the world: poverty, famine, war, sickness...** We pray to God, not because he causes or allows these things, but because he alone can bring light in the darkness and suffering of the world.. His ways may be beyond our comprehension, but we know that God hears us when we cry to him. Like Bartimaeus we do not need to be complacent about suffering but cry out to the Lord and get up and throw off anything which is stopping us stepping out to seek healing.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

22 October, 2006

1. **Sometimes the disciples seem a dense lot.** Time and time again Jesus spoke of the nature of his death and resurrection. Yet still his companions failed to understand. James and John had taken in the part about glory. Their mother, ambitious for her sons, is anxious for them to get the reward she thinks they deserve. They had failed to see that glory is a consequence of service and righteous suffering [Mark 10.(32—34) 35-45]
2. **Jesus responded to James and John** by asking if they were prepared to undergo the sufferings that Jesus had just foretold for himself. He had no power to appoint anyone for God would be the judge. The other disciples were angered by the brothers' bid for status. Jesus went on to explain again the nature of the kingdom of God, the nature of servant leadership, and prime example of the Son of Man, the image he held of his own ministry.
3. **Leadership is an honour** bestowed on those who serve, not on those who seek status and power. This injunction and the many New Testament warnings to leaders about their conduct are still valid. In our ministering communities we seek to discern people who will be our leaders as local priests and deacons and in other leadership roles. Such discernment will focus on the servant character of the person, not just on skills and abilities. Will their aim be the best interest of those they lead? Will they care for those they lead? Will they gain satisfaction from the growth and development of others? Will they be willing to listen? Will they accept feedback and advice? Will they seek to please God?
4. **The same tests can be applied to the Church itself** as a serving ministering community. How much of our action is about serving others with a servant heart and how much about our own status in the community, our own advancement, our own good? To what extent are we prepared to suffer for the sake of others rather than operate out of self-protection and self-interest. Jesus' words challenge us today just as much as they challenged James and John.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

15 October, 2006

1. **The rich man was sincere** in seeking Jesus' advice about how to inherit eternal life. (Mark 10.17-31). He was an exemplary fellow who had done well. He keeps the law: he hasn't murdered anyone, stolen, defrauded, or committed adultery He's done the right thing by his mother and father. "You shall not defraud" is not one of the Ten Commandments. Perhaps the insertion of this and the omission about coveting is deliberate. This man does not need to covet others' good for he has so much himself, and all obtained legally, perhaps by hard work and clever management. Truly he is exemplary in the eyes of the world, probably deserving his success. There are lots of people like this in our society too—hardworking, successful, well-respected with good families - good citizens.
2. **But this man knows there is something missing.** What about eternal life? Jesus perceptively saw what it was and lovingly confronted him with his love of money and perhaps pride in his success. Jesus didn't criticize the man's ability to make money. He was criticizing the man's reliance on himself—"a self-made man". Jesus knew people themselves cannot bring about their own salvation. Riches are not the path to heaven. What is required is a complete trust in and reliance on God. Jesus reassures his disciples that the path of discipleship, denial of self and commitment to follow Christ, will bring its reward.
3. **Some people have taken Jesus instruction literally** and given their wealth away, to find the riches of Jesus' promise. We can think, for example, of Francis of Assisi, who founded the Franciscan Order. The challenge to us is to understand that we in Australia, all of us, are rich in comparison to many other peoples of the world. Hear the words of a Filipino priest who visited Australia recently with ABM, "...many Australians, even well-meaning, good Christians, don't have any idea that their life, compared to many people in the third world, is and feels like heaven. Many here don't realize how lucky they are that hunger, thirst, poverty, unemployment is not a daily reality. ..you have the power within your means to make a difference."