

LORDSBRIDGE TEAM OF CHURCHES



The Church's prayer for this Sunday

Almighty God,
you have made us for yourself,
and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you:
pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself,
and so bring us at last to your heavenly city
where we shall see you face to face;
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.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 26th September 2021

A reading from Numbers 11.4–6,10–16,24–29

⁴ The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! ⁵We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; ⁶but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.'

¹⁰ Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. ¹¹So Moses said to the Lord, 'Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favour in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ¹²Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, "Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child", to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? ¹³Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, "Give us meat to eat!" ¹⁴I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. ¹⁵If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favour in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.'

¹⁶ So the Lord said to Moses, 'Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you.'

LORDSBRIDGE TEAM OF CHURCHES



²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. ²⁵Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.

²⁶ Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷And a young man ran and told Moses, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.' ²⁸And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, 'My lord Moses, stop them!' ²⁹But Moses said to him, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!'

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

A Gospel reading from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9:38-50

³⁸ John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' ³⁹But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

⁴² 'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹ 'For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'

LORDSBRIDGE TEAM OF CHURCHES



A reflection from Revd Charles Fraser, lead minister in The Eversdens.

Who are you?

I mean, really, who are you? Take a moment to ponder that question...and then ask yourself how you came to your answer. I wonder whether you defined yourself by your job, or by your history, or by particular critical experiences in your life, or by your relationships, or some combination of the above?

Another way to approach this question: "Who are you?" is to think about who gets to tell you who you are? Who has the most influence in shaping your self-image? Is it your parents, your partner, your friends and colleagues? Or perhaps it's the world of advertising or Instagram, which constantly tries to overwhelm us with ads or posts picturing perfect people leading perfect lives all designed to tell us who we are, or at least who we should be. Or maybe it's the news media, eager to make you anxious with a constant barrage of worrisome headlines.

I ask these questions because I think this passage is very much about identity, although, perhaps not at first glance. On the surface the gospel seems to be about Jesus admonishing his disciples to relax their attitudes, to stop worrying about others who are following him (but not, apparently, to their satisfaction) and instead focus on what matters or, perhaps even more importantly, on avoiding those things that can cause one to stumble and stray from the narrow road.

Scholars tell us that this particular section reflects some conflicts between early Christian communities. Mark is framing this part of his narrative, in other words, to address some of the problems his church is having with other Christians. It was clear that the early Christian church was not fully united in their beliefs, sometimes clashed with each other, and occasionally even berated one another over differences in practice. How little things have changed! In other words, Mark was trying to help his congregation answer the question of who they are. Will they, he asks, define themselves over and against other Christians or will they discover their identity in their attempt to follow Jesus, to care for the vulnerable, and to avoid those things that are destructive to self, neighbours and the wider community.

Which brings me back to the question of identity and, in particular, how seductive it is to try to determine who we are by casting stones at others. Note the tone of the disciples' statement: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." More complaint or even

LORDSBRIDGE TEAM OF CHURCHES



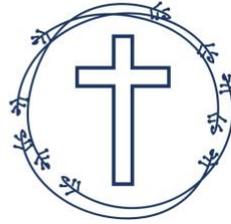
accusation rather than observation, the disciples want Jesus to affirm their judgment and action against this other follower because he was not playing by their rules or following their lead. The disciples, in other words, have decided who they are and defined themselves over and against this other person. They are defining themselves as the leaders of the fledgling Church, more important than others doing works in Jesus's name; the inner circle who should be obeyed by lesser disciples. What's striking, of course, is that all this happens almost immediately after Jesus chided their earlier arguments about which of them was the greatest which we heard last week. It seems that all Jesus' admonishment did was to encourage them to give up jockeying for position amongst themselves so that they could vie together against everyone else!

In this storm of uncertainty about our true identity, we are often tempted to take matters into our own hands and address the question of identity on our own. Certainly, there's plenty of encouragement from the world around us to do just that. As Frank Sinatra put it: 'And much more than this, I did it my way.' We are encouraged relentlessly to define ourselves through our accomplishments or our possessions. The moment you venture down this road, however, you're doomed to a sense of scarcity where there is never "enough" – accomplishments, titles, possessions, money, youth, whatever commodity you've decided is your measure – and each and every other person around you therefore becomes a competitor. And before long you're trying to tell other people what to do and judging them for not conforming to your expectations.

When Jesus sees this happen with his disciples, he responds by inviting them, as we saw last week, to entertain the peculiar logic of God's kingdom where the weak and vulnerable are to be exalted and where glory comes through service. This is the way of the cross. This week, he reiterates his counsel that mercy and love are the vehicles through which we discover and express our identity. And one of the great things about service, love, and mercy is that you never run out of them. There is no scarcity of opportunity to care for others, no lack of occasions to love your neighbour. So I'll ask again, who are you? And, who influences how you see yourself?

Christians have from the beginning of our story struggled with this question, so it is not surprising that we struggle with it still. But as we wrestle with it, perhaps we can remember that identity isn't something we can attain, but only receive as a gift. And one of the primary reasons Jesus came was to tell us that we are beloved, holy, precious, and raised up in God's eyes so that we might also hear ourselves called to lives of love, mercy, compassion, and service. The cross, in other words, was not the

LORDSBRIDGE TEAM
OF CHURCHES



vehicle by which Jesus made it possible for God to love us, but rather was God's message through Jesus that we were and are loved all along.

The life of faith begun in the cleansing waters of our baptism is a journey of discovering again and again that we ultimately know who we are when we remember whose we are, God's own beloved people, called to love others as Christ has loved us.

Amen.