Sunday 27 August –Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Scripture: Isaiah 22: 19-23; Psalm 137; Romans 11: 33-36; Matthew 16: 13-20

*Jesus said, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.’*

In other parts of the gospels, we hear Jesus talking about building houses on sand and on rocks and making it clear which is the best. He clearly wants to affirm Peter in his new role – for which he has been given a new name. It is likely that Jesus used the Aramaic, Cephas, which also means ‘rock’ but we usually use Peter which is derived from Greek. Whichever name we use, we have to admit that Peter was not always a solid rock. There were times when he was distinctly wobbly – but Jesus trusted that over time, the rock would become firm and stable. It would take time – but the Spirit that inspired him to recognise Jesus for who he was will give Peter the courage and strength to lead the early Church.

* How do you think Peter might have felt when Jesus said he would be the founding rock of this new grouping called the Church?
* How do you think the other disciples felt when Jesus said these words – and in later years?

The ministry of the Pope is sometimes called the Petrine ministry – reminding us that the foundation of it goes right back to this conversation. Pray today for the Pope in his role as successor to Peter.

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Monday 28 August – St Augustine

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-5, 8-10; Psalm 149; Matthew 23: 13-22

*Jesus said, ‘But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.’*

This is a very severe judgement Jesus is making on the scribes and Pharisees. They were, on the whole, good people but inclined to be very judgemental in their own turn. They believed that to enter the kingdom of heaven, you had to live a deeply pious, religious life. All well and good but most of us simply cannot manage this. In their insistence on perfection, many people were excluded from the kingdom that God had created them to enter. It is a danger for us too – either to be exacting in what we expect of others… or believing that there is no hope for us since we are so imperfect.

* Being honest with yourself – which side do you feel you belong to… someone who demands perfection (or as close as) in yourself and others? Or someone who just feels inadequate in the face of what seems to be asked of you?
* How can we help to open the door to the people God invites and who may be less than perfect?

Pray today for the wisdom to know what is the right balance between striving for perfect behaviour and attitudes and the realities of human nature. Pray for those who feel unworthy and reluctant to enter our churches – that they may find a warm and understanding welcome.

*KT*

Tuesday 29 August (The Beheading of St John the Baptist)

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Psalm 138; Mark 6: 17-29

*The king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.*

This is a cruel end to someone who spent his adult life preaching and encouraging people to live better lives. It is a story that shows the power of jealousy and bitterness – and the reaction many people have towards those whose lives are a challenge to them. It is a bleak and gory episode – the head of young man being brought into a dining room and handed around like a piece of meat – and we might wonder, what then? And then the contrast – disciples coming quietly and, perhaps, under cover of darkness and maybe even with soldiers turning a blind eye, taking their leader’s body and giving it the burial that gives some dignity to the someone who died an innocent man.

* What do you make of this account of the death of John the Baptist – and the people involved in it?
* When have you seen good people persecuted by those who object to their life-style?

Pray today for those who stand up for what is right and good – especially those who suffer at the hands of others.

*KT*

Wednesday 30 August (Ss Margaret Clitherow, Anne Line and Margaret Ward)

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2: 9-13; Psalm 138; Matthew 23: 27-32

*Jesus said, ‘You say, “If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.”’*

When we look back into history, we see many instances of people being hounded or killed – and many injustices – like the killing of women such as Margaret Clitherow, Anne Line and Margaret Ward who died for their allegiance to their faith. It is very easy to believe that we would, of course, have known who the prophets were and would not have played any part in their persecution. But history and the present day show that it is never that easy – especially when we do not feel comfortable with what the “prophets” of our own day are saying – or when we may have to stand out from the crowd to stand up for them.

* Who are the people standing up for goodness and truth in our own day?
* Do you stand alongside them – or support them – or try to ignore their message?

Give time today to thinking about people who are modern day prophets and truth-tellers. Pray for them – and for the courage to show that you support them even if it makes life uncomfortable for you.

*KT*

Thursday 31 August (St Aidan and the Saints of Lindisfarne)

Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 3: 1-9; Psalm 125; Matthew 7: 21, 24-29

*Jesus said, ‘The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.’*

Recent archaeological digs on Lindisfarne have unearthed a Saxon chapel on the Heugh – one of the high, rocky points on the Island overlooking the medieval priory. There is evidence of other Saxon buildings in other, more sheltered parts of the Island but this one must have borne the brunt of the winds and rains the beset the Island. From this spot, the invading forces of the Vikings would have been all too visible as they approached the fertile lands of Northumbria. After 1500 years, it has taken archaeologists to find the remains of the church building – but the Church that Aidan and the other Saints founded has survived the storms of the intervening years – and continues to withstand the storms of our own day.

* What are the storms that beset the Church in our own day?
* What reassurance do you find in remembering the deep and strong history of Christianity in the north-east of England?

Spend time today reflecting on the long years of Christianity in our part of the world – and the deep roots that it has given us to draw from. Give thanks for the witness of these ancient peoples – and pray for the grace to play your part in sustaining the life of the Church they founded into the future.

*KT*

Friday 1 September

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4: 1-8; Psalm 96; Matthew 25: 1-13

*Jesus said, ‘The kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.’*

Jesus is very good at taking things that are very familiar to people and using them to teach very deep truths. Just about every society celebrates weddings with a wide variety of customs. For those most closely involved there is great excitement and this may explain part of the problem here. The foolish bridesmaids could simply have been so excited that they failed to check the details – and assumed that it would all work out and, if not, that other people might bail them out. This is the way for many of us too – not perhaps because we are excited about a wedding – but assuming that others will take responsibility for things that we should, in fact, be taking care of ourselves.

* When have you assumed that others will sort things out so you don’t have to?
* When have you found yourself landed with responsibility because others have been unprepared or failed to plan ahead?

Spend some time today thinking about your family and parish life and the responsibilities you have – especially those that require planning ahead. Reflect on how well you undertake those responsibilities or how easy you find it to let others do them for you. In a time of prayer, ask the Lord to give you wisdom and foresight as you take an adult’s responsibility for your faith and supporting others in theirs.

*KT*

Saturday 2 September

Scriptures: 1 Thessalonians 4: 9-11; Psalm 97; Matthew 25: 14-30

*Jesus said, ‘The one with the two talents also came forward, saying, “Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”’*

Of the three servants given talents, this is probably the one we would feel most comfortable. We would be unlikely to want the responsibility of five talents (or their equivalent in terms of gifts and responsibilities). We would also not want to be like the one with one talent who was paralysed with fear as to what to do with it. Somehow, the half-way mark – the medium – feels manageable. It still comes with responsibility, though. God still entrusts our lives, our talents, our world to our keeping and expects us to use them to the best of our ability until the day he welcomes us home and asks us to show him what we have made of our lives.

* How do you feel about being entrusted with gifts from God and the responsibility to use them?
* When do you feel like the person given just the one talent – afraid of what God might be asking of you?

Reflect on the life and gifts that God has entrusted to you. Be honest about how well you seem to be using them and ask God’s grace and support in being more confident and enthusiastic about living your life to the full – and using the gifts from God to help others to do so too.

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