

# SUNDAY REFLECTIONS

Sunday 18 July 2021 | The Seventh Sunday after Trinity

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## TODAY'S READINGS

Jeremiah 23.1-6 | Psalm 23 | Ephesians 2.11-22 | Mark 6.30-34, 53-56

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+ In the name of God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Sunday evening 31 million people watched the final of the Euro 2020 tournament live from Wembley in London, becoming one of the most watched moments in British television history. It's been striking how so much of the news coverage of England, despite the shocking stories of the recklessness and racism that have unfortunately been brought to light over recent days, has been rightfully supportive. There's been widespread acclaim that this group of players have encouraged and helped each other in the best way possible and that under the leadership and management of Gareth Southgate, we have good reason for optimism.

Now, just to reassure you, I don't consider myself to be a particularly adept football expert, a game I've never really excelled in spite of my best efforts, but even I can see that Southgate knows what it means to provide generous and nurturing leadership. And although expectations were low at the start of his tenure, the fruits of his patience and quiet determination have been the results we've witnessed, on and off the pitch, during the course of the competition. The scenes on Sunday night of the manager embracing distraught and disheartened players in the wake of the penalty shoot-out testament to someone who knows what it means to realise that lasting success isn't based on individual achievement or significance; but on a togetherness, personal and professional, that can endure through times of elation and real disappointment.

In today's gospel reading, which rather strangely, unites two separate parts of Mark's gospel, we hear Jesus fresh from the successes of his Galilean ministry given his insight into what true leadership, that which is humble, self-giving and kindly looks like. The passage begins by taking us back to Jesus' command to his disciples a few weeks ago, when after his rejection at Nazareth he decides to send his closest friends out in pairs, so that they might share in his work of preaching, healing and announcing the arrival of God's Kingdom. We're told that they were instructed to take nothing with them except a staff - no food, no money, no bag, not even a change of clothes - commissioned to travel light so they could journey quickly and efficiently to share the message with which they'd been entrusted.

Interestingly, the gospel writer doesn't tell us what Jesus occupied his time with whilst his friends were absent, one of the many curiosities that is left to our imagination, but we are told that they do indeed return. They gather around their teacher and Lord and report to him everything they've done since they were last with him. Here again though the gospel is silent in detailing the exact intricacies of how the disciples had spent their time, their whole experience summed up for us in just one sentence.

We can, however, safely assume that their endeavours had been met with some success, since a crowd of people soon appears and presses in on them, to such an extent that we're told they don't

have any time to eat. Their obedience to Jesus has brought about a real fruitfulness; a crowd eager to learn more about the one who sent them, a people open to the living God to whom their ministry had testified. Perhaps then its for this reason that for the first and only time in the gospel Mark refers to the twelve disciples as '*apostles*'. Those appointed for a particular mission and purpose, given authority by Jesus to speak of all that he had already done.

Yet, although they try their best to seek out some time on their own, the crowd won't leave Jesus nor his friends alone. They try and escape across the lake to the other side, they can't escape the fact that people are eager to be found in their company. And its this persistence that leads us to glimpsing, if only for a moment, the loving characteristics of God whom Jesus makes known, the one who embodies for us the nature and quality of a Kingdom not of this world. Hence, the gospel tells us that when Jesus sees the people he has '*compassion*' for them, because they were '*like sheep without a shepherd*'. We might think this a confusing turn of phrase, not least because its perhaps not the kindest of compliments to be likened to a sheep. Though, like every turn of phrase chosen by the authors of the gospels, it carries with a greater and more symbolic meaning than might be first presumed. Jesus' emotional response both indicative of his care for the peoples' welfare and his criticism of the religious and political leadership who were failing to guide and inspire God's people.

If we turn our attention to the Old Testament we'll find the same commentary made against the failures of leaderless Israel, where those charged with positions of power and prominence had failed in their duty to guard, defend and uphold the rights and dignity of those entrusted to their charge. In the book of Numbers, after Moses is told by God that he will not see the Promised Land to which he has guided Israel through their sojourn in the wilderness. He asks God that he might raise up someone else to be their guide, so '*the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd*'<sup>1</sup>. Thus, just as Joshua is appointed in response to Moses' plea for guidance into the future, so in the Galilean wilderness Jesus is presented as the one, appointed by God, to whom his people are to look.

This isn't simply a charismatic leadership, an individual who enjoys popular acclaim and thus can abuse the excitement that greets him. Nor does it come from careful political posturing or gesturing, trying to appease different groups without sincerity or honesty. Rather, Jesus' authority comes from one who engages sincerely and with heartfelt interest with those in need of his help and support. It is the '*compassion*' that Jesus has for the crowd that marks him as one who is worth us attending to sticking close to, allowing his words to shape our perspectives and frame our understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 27.17

Here then, the gospel suggests for us that around Christ there is formed a new community. A collection of enquires, disciples, ponderers, sceptics, enthusiasts and followers, united in the fold of the compassionate Shepherd; in whom the reality of God's inexhaustible love is disclosed. A community of which we too are invited to be a part, coming to Christ for teaching, instruction, help and succour. Expectant of all that flows from our willingness to listen to all that he has to say to us.

How then? We might ask, do we become part of such a community? That holy temple in the Lord described for us in the letter to the Ephesians, where united together we become a dwelling-place for God. Well, the answer I'd humbly suggest lies in taking note of Jesus' words to his disciples at the start of today's gospel.

*'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while'*. The only prerequisite of discipleship, the single effort that's demanded of us, is our preparedness, our inclination to be found in the presence of Christ. As much as Jesus asks us to work with him and for him, to be eager and active in being his people in the world, he asks us first to rest in his fellowship. Nothing more, nothing less. We are not the originators or finishers of our faith, instead we look to the one who offers consolation and comfort, in whom our trust can never be disappointed.

In the middle of the busyness of the disciples' ministry, regardless of any success or failure, Jesus offers time and space for recuperation. To retreat away from others and become aware that our fitness and flourishing as followers, rises and falls with our commitment to be moulded and shaped by finding refreshment in the presence of the God he makes tangible.

So today, this week, before anything else, might we try prioritising nothing more than just that. Actively, quietly, persistently, confidently, prayerfully aligning ourselves with him who is the shepherd and guardian of our souls. Who does most certainly call us to respond actively to the call of his Kingdom, but first asks us to receive, to slip away from the crowd. To become a community which speaks and serves after the manner of the God to whom we all belong.

+ In the name of God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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## **CHURCH OF ENGLAND RESOURCES**

<https://www.churchofengland.org/>

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>



The Church of England online weekly service for the Seventh Sunday after Trinity can be found [here](#).

**The Collect**  
*for The Seventh Sunday after Trinity*

Lord of all power and might,  
the author and giver of all good things:  
graft in our hearts the love of your name,  
increase in us true religion,  
nourish us with all goodness,  
and of your great mercy keep us in the same;  
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. Amen.

**Old Testament Reading**

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

**New Testament Reading**

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision'—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the

dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

### **Gospel Reading**

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

## Prayers of Intercession *during Ordinary Time*

In peace, let us pray to Jesus our Lord,  
who ever lives to make intercession for us.

*Lord, receive our praise, and hear our prayer.*

Saviour of the world,  
be present in all places of suffering, violence and pain,  
and bring hope even in the darkest night.  
Inspire us to continue your work of reconciliation today.

*Lord, receive our praise, and hear our prayer.*

Lord of the Church,  
empower by your Spirit all Christian people,  
and the work of your Church in every land.  
Give us grace to proclaim the gospel joyfully in word and deed.

*Lord, receive our praise, and hear our prayer.*

Shepherd and Guardian of our souls,  
guide and enable all who lead and serve this community  
and those on whom we depend for our daily needs.  
Grant that we may seek the peace and welfare of this place.

*Lord, receive our praise, and hear our prayer.*

Great Physician,  
stretch out your hand to bring comfort, wholeness and peace  
to all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit.  
Fill us with compassion, that we may be channels of your healing love.

*Lord, receive our praise, and hear our prayer.*

Conqueror of death,  
remember for good those whom we love but see no longer.  
Help us to live this day in the sure and certain hope of your eternal victory.

*Lord, receive our praise, and hear our prayer.*

Let us commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray, to the mercy and protection of God.