

# Collect, Readings and Reflection for 07 September 2025, the 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity

## **Collect** *(the Church's prayer for today):*

Almighty and everlasting God,  
you are always more ready to hear than  
we to pray  
and to give more than either we desire or  
deserve:  
pour down upon us the abundance of  
your mercy,  
forgiving us those things of which our  
conscience is afraid  
and giving us those good things  
which we are not worthy to ask  
but through the merits and mediation  
of 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.

*Or*

God of constant mercy,  
who sent your Son to save us:  
remind us of your goodness,  
increase your grace within us,  
that our thankfulness may grow,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

## **Readings: Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33**

*Today's reflection is by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Cain.*

### **God's justice**

Those of you who heard me preach last week will remember that I attempted to say something about migration, asylum and its current impact on UK politics and life. The sermon prompted more reaction than many I've preached, including a challenge and a story. The challenge was, 'Have you spent much time speaking to people who are being impacted by refugee and asylum seeker settlement in communities in Leeds?' My tangential answer to this question was, "I think I understand the issues". The more direct and truthful answer would have been, "No, I haven't spent much time speaking to people who are being impacted by refugee and asylum seeker settlement". My questioner told me a story of a young single-mum who was housed in Leeds, in a private rent at the expense of the local authority. The private landlord of this woman discovered that he would increase his return if he rented to the Home Office – an HMO, or house of multiple occupation, and so he gave notice to his tenant, who was moved to a different part of the city, and in moved a family of refugees.

Later on Sunday evening I visited my friend Paul in hospital. During the visit I spoke to Paul's son and his girlfriend who had recently felt moved to stand outside a hotel housing refugees in Seacroft. Their intention was to show support for the refugees because there was a noisy protest outside the hotel. During their vigil, they had

conversations with people who were part of the protest and heard very similar stories. How do we respond? How can we look the refugee and those who are displaced by the refugee in the eye? Like many of you here, perhaps, my day-to-day life is not directly affected by these issues, yet. But my heart breaks at these stories of misery and human diminishment, and I long to know, what does justice look like here?

There are perhaps two conventional answers to this question.

The first answer is that justice is about freedom. Just countries seek to order society to give the maximum liberty to citizens, and this includes freedom of conscience, assembly and speech; the freedom to hold property, earn a living, and avoid arbitrary arrest. I guess we would recognise this kind of justice as underpinning the law in our own country. But there is a problem or limitation of this kind of justice, which is that, over time, freedom tends to inequality. The pursuit of political freedom without economic equality leads many citizens of our free country to experience such poverty that their lives are not free. They do not see justice.

The second answer is that justice is about rights. It's about recognising the inherent worth of every individual human being. Pursuing justice means taking up the cases of those whose rights have been ignored or suppressed. This kind of justice doesn't attempt to order the affairs of an entire country or community but seeks to restore dignity and life to individuals or groups whose rights have been snatched away. This kind of justice is not always able to identify the policy or resources required to balance the rights of one individual against another. It just takes up the case of those who have been wronged, one person or group at a time.

The first kind of justice concentrates on guaranteeing people's freedom to be able to do things that don't harm others. The second kind of justice is about securing people's right not to have harmful things done to them. In his book, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, Sam Wells calls the first kind, the one about freedom, justice for the winners, and the second kind, the one about rights, justice for the losers.

Imagine yourself for a moment outside that hotel in Seacroft. Imagine the piercing looks of a young refugee and a young Leeds mum. What are you going to do about it? Which kind of justice is going to help – freedom or rights?

In truth, the Church has always been divided between these two kinds of justice. Christians believe that all are created in God's image and worthy of dignity and honour. Followers of Jesus have a heart for the poor and so the Church is alert to the second kind of justice. And the Church, particularly perhaps the established Church of England, also has an interest in the good and peaceful ordering of society; the first kind of justice. I wonder if one or other of these two kinds of justice makes most sense to you.

There is a way of avoiding the question and averting the piercing looks. And that is to say that the only justice that matters in the end is God's justice. To accept that we are all sinners before God and in need of God's mercy. To rejoice in the truth that Jesus' went to the cross to reconcile us to God and that our eternal salvation is assured by

God's merciful justice. The strength of this appeal to God is that it puts Jesus at the centre of our idea of justice and insists that mercy is at the heart of God. The weakness of this appeal to God is that it has nothing to say to the refugee or Leeds mum today. It answers their questions by saying, "There are winners and losers in life, but we can all be winners in the end". In many circumstances, God's ultimate justice might be the only justice available, but is there something more?

Our first reading this morning was from a short letter from the Apostle Paul to his dear friend Philemon. Paul is in prison and is being attended by a man named Onesimus. Onesimus was a slave owned by Philemon and it is not clear from the letter whether he was sent by his master to attend to Paul in prison, or whether he ran away. What is clear from the letter is that, during his time with Paul, Onesimus became a believer in Jesus. What is also clear is that Paul is attempting to return Onesimus to Philemon, not as a slave, but as a free man, as a brother, as a partner in the gospel. So, Paul makes an appeal to Philemon. Paul's appeal does not rest entirely on Philemon's good will. He is prepared to make an investment or sacrifice: "If Onesimus has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me". Inspired by Jesus' example, Paul is prepared to lay down his life to reconcile Onesimus to Philemon, just as Jesus reconciled Paul and us to God.

If Paul had been guided by the first kind of justice, respect for the law and the good ordering of society may have compelled him to return Onesimus to Philemon as a slave. If Paul had been guided by the second kind of justice he may have been inspired to send Onesimus away as a free man, leaving Onesimus and Philemon as strangers, or even enemies. But Paul was looking for a way that went beyond conventional ideas of justice. Paul was prepared to put himself on the line to create the new community that we call Church.

As part of that new community, we are called to seek justice, especially the second kind. It is good for us to walk with those who have been wronged. At this moment this walk may bring us close to those seeking asylum and those who have a grievance because of those seeking asylum. It is good for us to offer practical support and lift our voices to show solidarity, to advocate, to demand something different. It is good for us to build relationships listen to stories, impact policy, change laws, and work for the common good. To protect or restore rights and to set people free.

But when that work is done, people still won't have what they really need. Because the law can only go so far. Justice can give dignity, affirm rights, restore property, clear one's name and outlaw oppression. All these things are good and necessary because they create the conditions that make life possible. But justice on its own does not make a life. Life is about more than getting our share and living free from harm. Life is about relationships and flourishing and friendship and forgiveness and joy. This is the invitation that Paul makes to Philemon, to go beyond justice, to forgive, perhaps, extend the hand of friendship and receive Onesimus as a dear brother. The Church is called to make similar invitations. A call where we practice the justice of God, which stands with and sometimes between those who have been wronged, and which goes

beyond freedom and rights. Inspired by Jesus' example, the Church is where we find that beyond freedom is friendship; beyond dignity is celebration; beyond security is flourishing; beyond vindication is forgiveness; and beyond order is worship.

The something more is the Church.

Friends in our worship we sing songs for justice, and we sing songs that go beyond justice and give voice to forgiveness and celebration and joy and reconciliation and restoration. We are called to sing the song that Paul sang to Philemon. It is the song that Jesus sings to the Church. And that is the song of love.

Amen.

S⊕ JAMES WOODSIDE  
HORSFORTH



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