



It's not a comfortable week, this week, but it is a significant one. This week we really have an opportunity to be confronted with the powerful implications of living a Gospel-centred life in the real world. The essential challenge this week has to do with seeing the world truly – seeing the signs, as Jesus put it – and refusing to ‘prophecy lies’ or pretend everything’s alright when injustice is being done. Being a “whistle-blower” on the world’s brokenness is never fun, and it won’t win us any popularity contests, but it is the cross-bearing work of God’s reign – if we have the courage to choose to do it.

May your worship this week inspire you to see clearly and live with ruthless clarity and honesty

INTRODUCTIONS

For use by lectors, in order of service, parish bulletins and magazines

Isaiah 5:1-7: A metaphorical prophecy of judgement against Israel and Judah, pictured as God’s vineyard, for their lack of justice.
OR **Jeremiah 23:23-29**: A prophecy against false prophets who make up lies in God’s name, compared to God’s true word which burns like fire and smashes rock like a hammer.

Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19: A Psalm of repentance for abandoning God, and praying for God to once again tend and protect God’s people as

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a vineyard that is well cared for.

OR **Psalm 82**: This Psalm, picturing a ‘council of the gods’, has God speaking judgement over the gods of nations who oppress the poor and allow injustice to continue unchecked.

Hebrews 11:29-12:2: A reminder of the “great cloud of witnesses” – people of faith who suffered for their message and stayed committed to God through great trial and heartache – who surround us. They encourage us to stay firm, and follow Christ – the one who endured the cross – faithfully.

Luke 12:49-56: Jesus grieves his coming suffering, recognising the conflict that will arise over his message, and challenging people to discern the true nature of the time they live in, in the same way that they interpret the weather.

For individual readings click references above - for all readings click here -

<http://bible.oremus.org/?>

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LECTIONARY NOTES

RCL: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

Isaiah 5:1-7

Isaiah’s poetic lament is a masterful piece of irony that can be read on different levels. In its literal imagery, it speaks of the disappointment that must have been as well known to farmers in ancient Israel as it is in our own time: after days and weeks of tedious labor, one may find that the crop that appears is valueless. In metaphorical language that was common in the ancient world, though, planting and tending a vineyard could represent courtship.

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A man wooing a woman to be his wife did so, at least in part, in the hope that she would be a faithful and fruitful partner, bearing many strong children for his heritage. Verse 3 begins to reveal this bitter undertone, alluding to a relationship gone sour when it was founded on great hope.

If we read the “characters” in this story as the best man (the prophet, singing of his friend’s plight), the bridegroom (Yahweh) and the faithless woman (Israel), suddenly the prophetic intent of Isaiah’s poem becomes painfully clear. Speaking through the singer, Yahweh challenges the hearers to choose sides, to judge whether the relationship has been neglected. The story is told in such a way that almost anyone would sympathize with the disappointed suitor – setting the faithless people up to pass judgment against themselves! In verse 7, the identities are made clear, and so is the indictment: the vineyard will be destroyed, abandoned, because “he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry.”

- In our human relationships, do we sometimes “get what we have coming to us?”
- Is that a reasonable model for the way in which God relates to God’s people, or not?

Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18

The collection of the Psalms is so ancient that we can never really identify the composers or the dates of their composition. Still, they often give internal hints that provide a historical context. It is important to the setting of this psalm that verse 2 calls for the Lord to act “in the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh.” These were among the smaller tribes of the northern kingdom – that portion of the Hebrew people who became identified as Israel when the Davidic monarchy broke apart. They cry out for rescue of “the vine” brought out of Egypt; here is the metaphor of planter and vineyard again! In the psalm, though, we hear the distressed cry of God’s people when they find themselves indeed being broken down (v. 12), ravaged (v. 13), and burned like rubbish (v. 15). These

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references can almost certainly be connected to the invasion of the Assyrians who conquered and largely destroyed Israel in the 7th and 6th centuries BCE.

Paired as they are in the Lectionary, the Psalm offers us “the other side” of the relationship described in Isaiah. Now Israel really is suffering the punishment threatened in the prophecy, and they are raising – perhaps belatedly – a cry for mercy, restoration, and salvation.

- Why do we so often find ourselves with “20/20 hindsight?”
- How often is it really the result of naïvete?
- Are there times when we persist in acting in self-interest, until we discover that we have brought pain on ourselves and others – and realize it too late?

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

The lessons from the Old Testament have been rather troubling, speaking of disappointment, estrangement, and retribution. The writer of Hebrews looks back through the checkered history of the Jewish people from a post-Resurrection perspective and calls his readers to recognize God’s work even in the bleakest of times. In relating the stories of Abraham, Moses, and all the lesser heroes of Israel, the author acknowledges their suffering. The author weaves the thread of heroic faith throughout, though, reminding his audience that faith always leans forward into the unknown because of an unshakeable trust in God’s goodness.

Jesus, by the example of his human life and by his divine transformation of shame and violence into victory over death’s finality, became “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” (12:2) Each believer is now called to run the race with renewed assurance and hope, but we are also surrounded and encouraged by the “great cloud of witnesses” who lived faithfully in their own times, by the signs and promises they had received.

- What is the source of faith?
- Is its origin in logic? Is it based on our own experience?

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- Does faith come from accepting the teaching or testimony of people we consider to have wisdom or authority?
- If all those sources of validation were stripped away, on what would you base your faith?

Luke 12:49-56

Ouch! Jesus is not offering us much comfort and assurance in this passage. Within the book of Luke, chapter 12 falls within the long “journey narrative,” in which most of Jesus’s teaching and his confrontations with the religious establishment occur at various stages along the way from Galilee to Jerusalem. We are caught up in the growing intensity of his ministry and Luke’s dramatic foreshadowing of the crucifixion that awaits him.

Here we return pointedly to the prophetic theme introduced in Isaiah 5 and Psalm 80. Jesus challenges us very directly to see beyond our rosy expectations and recognize the conflict inherent in being his followers – a conflict between God’s reign and the world’s values, between human loyalties and the call to follow something greater.

Our own expectations are not so different from those of Jesus’s original hearers, who were holding out hope for a Messiah in the form of a great conquering warrior who would at last restore the kingdom of Israel on earth and usher in an era of peace and prosperity. Our modern version is the tendency to see Jesus as a benign, peaceful, and loyal friend who comforts and defends us. While he is all that, he is representing himself very differently here! His reference to bringing fire to the earth, and to bringing division rather than peace, tells us that a moment of crisis, of judgment, and of commitment awaits every believer who intends to take Jesus seriously.

Fire does not always imply destruction, but might also be an instrument of refinement – purifying, strengthening, and catalyzing us into a new being. Jesus’s baptism of fire and crisis of decision can mean his own impending trial and execution, or it can mean the

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turning point in our own lives when we are called to choose a path of discipleship that will bring with it some form of pain as well. Ultimately, like all of Jesus' teachings, this lesson points us toward the full fruition of God's kingdom – that redemption and salvation Jesus came to accomplish – and calls us to live in hope and preparation for that time.

- How do these lectionary readings, taken together, bring a Gospel message that encompasses both judgment and hope, retribution and mercy?
- How do they ask us to broaden our understanding of faith?
- How do they show us a more vivid, more faithful way for living our own lives, within our own relationships?

SERMON

Great Cloud of Witnesses, Proper 15 (C)

[RCL: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56](#)

In today's Epistle lesson, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews encourages us to persevere in our life of faith, no matter what difficulties we face. "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." The writer says, you have begun a good thing in becoming Christians. I want you to finish strong in what has been started in you.

A priest from the diocese of Maryland says, "I like to run. I'm not fast, but I enjoy running. Participating in marathons has given me an experience I have enjoyed about running. In marathons, the best runners in the world and normal mortals like myself get to compete in the very same race. I think that's neat. I will never find myself on the same tennis court with Serena Williams. If I were ever to toss a football, none of the Green Bay Packers would be there to receive it. But, when I ran the Chicago marathon, I (and 25,000 other runners) lined up at the same starting line as runners who held the

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best marathon times in the world. We ran the same course. We passed the same cheering crowds.”

“But I suppose it’s the finishing that really makes the difference. The elite runners were crossing the finish line when I was about half way through the course. They had about two hours to enjoy refreshments and rest, while I still had about thirteen miles of one foot in front of the other to reach my goal, and was wondering if I would really make it. But the beauty of the event is that for many of us, just finishing the race is the accomplishment, the goal.”

Very few have to run a marathon — participation is for fun. But the author of the letter to the Hebrews asks us a similar question: Will we finish the race that is our life with faith? Will we persevere? Or will we run off course, or give up? And the race is hard. In today’s gospel, Jesus tells us, if we follow him, if we stand up for what is right, we will experience conflict.

The writer of Hebrews, like a good coach, gives four pieces of advice about how to finish the race. To finish the race: recall who surrounds us. Remove what ways down on us. Rely on strength within us. Remember who goes before us. Recall who surrounds us: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” The epistle writer wants us to picture ourselves as athletes in an arena. As we strive toward our goal, to finish with faith, in peace and holiness, we run surrounded by people. The people in the stands are people who have demonstrated faith — faith that persevered, people who by the grace of God overcame great obstacles, and finished the race. These are people of the Bible, the men and women of the Church throughout the ages, people known personally by you and by me whose witness encourages us.

They are witnesses, not just spectators. There is a huge difference. A spectator watches you go through something. A witness is someone who has gone through something herself, and the root meaning of the word witness, from which we get the word “martyr,” is someone who may have given his life going through it. We have witnesses cheering us on, not just spectators, people who have

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gone through what we struggle with, people whose testimonies of the strength God gave them can, in turn, give us strength and courage. We have witnesses rooting for us, weeping with us when we stumble, calling to us when we wander, urging us to finish the race.

Our coach tells us also to remove what weighs down on us. Have you ever seen a track stars running a race wearing winter parkas, or with weights tied to their ankles, or carrying a backpack full of bricks? “Let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,” says our coach. What attitudes and actions, what past behavior and present entanglements weigh us down? What weights of sin and brokenness do we carry that cause us to stumble rather than sprint? We can set those weights down. God is ready to take them from us. God is ready to forgive and heal whatever we let get between us and God, whatever has come between us and other people, whatever wrongs we do to ourselves.

Our coach also tells us to rely on the strength within us. We are told to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” When the going gets tough, when the road is difficult, when the miles drag on, obstacles come up around every bend, when every stretch of the road seems like another steep hill to climb, we can rely on spiritual resources within us — spiritual resources we develop in training: in gathering with other Christians, in hearing and reading God’s word, in participating in the sacramental life of the church.

The word “perseverance” can also be translated as “patient endurance.” Endurance is one thing. We can endure and whine and complain all at the same time. Patient endurance looks like praying without ceasing for ourselves and others. It looks like encouraging others even in the midst of difficulty. It looks like saying something kind, or saying nothing at all when something unkind comes more readily to mind. It looks like giving of ourselves generously, even when we’re not sure what’s ahead of us and our inclination may be to think of ourselves first.

Most important of all, remember who goes before us. We can look “to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of

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the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”

We can and will finish the race strong in faith if we look to Jesus, if we keep our eyes focused on him, not being distracted by other things along the way that can cause us to lose our direction or footing and stumble. Jesus has gone before us, has shown us the way that leads to victory. If we keep our eyes on Jesus and follow him, we will not only make a good beginning in faith we too will finish and win the race.

In the race of our life, we have people cheering us on. We have someone willing to take on our burdens. We can train for patient endurance. We have a guide who leads us and will not leave us. Let us keep running until the prize is ours and we hear God say to us, “Well done!”

Amen.

COLLECTS OF THE DAY

Collect One

Grant to us, Lord, we beseech thee,
the spirit to think and do always
such things as be rightful;
that we, who cannot do any thing
that is good without thee,
may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Collect Two

Almighty God,
who sent your Holy Spirit
to be the life and light of your Church:
Open our hearts to the riches of his grace,
that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit

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in love and joy and peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Presider or deacon

Surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, let us pray to God who strengthens the weak.

Deacon or other leader

For this holy gathering, and for the people of God in every place.
Lord, have mercy.

For all nations and their leaders, and for mercy, justice, and peace
in the world.

Lord, have mercy.

For students and teachers, and all those returning to their studies.

Lord, have mercy.

For good weather and abundant crops, and for travelers and those
on vacation.

Lord, have mercy.

For the sick and the suffering, prisoners and their families, the
hungry and the oppressed,
and all in danger and need.

Lord, have mercy.

For those who rest in Christ and for all the dead.

Lord, have mercy.

For our city/town/parish and those who live in it, and for our
families, companions, and all those we
love.

Lord, have mercy.

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Lifting our voices with all creation, with _____ and all the saints, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ.

To you, O Lord.

Presider

God of all times and places, whose word is like fire, grant our prayers for all the world and bring peace to the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

POST COMMUNION

Holy Father,
who gathered us here around the table of your Son
to share this meal with the whole household of God:
In that new world where you reveal the fulness of your peace,
gather people of every race and language
to share in the eternal banquet
of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Lord of all mercy, we your faithful people have celebrated that one true sacrifice which takes away our sins and brings pardon and peace: by our communion keep us firm on the foundation of the gospel and preserve us from all sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

God of our pilgrimage, you have willed that the gates of mercy should stand open for those who trust in you: look upon us with your favour that we who follow the path of your will may never wander from the way of life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

PRAYERS

God of justice,
your word is light and truth.
Let your face shine on us to restore us,

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that we may walk in your way,
seeking justice and doing good. Amen.

Friends in Christ,
God invites us to hold the needs of our sisters and brothers
as dear to us as our own needs.
Loving our neighbors as ourselves,
we offer our thanksgivings and our petitions
on behalf of the church and the world.
Hear our prayers, God of power,
and through the ministry of your Son
free us from the grip of the tomb,
that we may desire you as the fullness of life
and proclaim your saving deeds to all the world. Amen.

As you heard the prayer of Isaac and Rebekah, O God,
and guided them in the way of your love,
so listen now to those who call upon you.
Move us to praise your gracious will,
for in Christ Jesus you have saved us from the deeds of death
and opened for us the hidden ways of your love.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord God, friend of those in need,
your Son Jesus has untied our burdens
and healed our spirits.
We lift up the prayers of our hearts for those still burdened,
those seeking healing,
those in need within the church and the world.
Hear our prayers
that we may love you with our whole being
and willingly share the concerns of our neighbours. Amen.

Creator God,
you call us to love and serve you
with body, mind, and spirit
through loving your creation
and our sisters and brothers.

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Open our hearts in compassion
and receive these petitions
on behalf of the needs of the church and the world.
Holy One,
hear our prayers and make us faithful stewards
of the fragile bounty of this earth
so that we may be entrusted with the riches of heaven. Amen.

We praise your abiding guidance, O God,
for you sent us Jesus, our Teacher and Messiah,
to model for us the way of love for the whole universe.
We offer these prayers of love
on behalf of ourselves and our neighbours,
on behalf of your creation and our fellow creatures.

Loving God,
open our ears to hear your word
and draw us closer to you,
that the whole world may be one with you
as you are one with us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

God of mercy and healing,
you who hear the cries of those in need,
receive these petitions of your people
that all who are troubled
may know peace, comfort, and courage.
Life-giving God,
heal our lives,
that we may acknowledge your wonderful deeds
and offer you thanks from generation to generation
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

God of salvation,
who sent your Son to seek out and save what is lost,
hear our prayers
on behalf of those who are lost in our day,
receiving these petitions and thanksgivings
with your unending compassion.

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Redeeming Sustainer,
visit your people
and pour out your strength and courage upon us,
that we may hurry to make you welcome
not only in our concern for others,
but by serving them
generously and faithfully in your name. Amen.

Judge eternal,
you love justice and hate oppression;
you give peace to those who seek it,
and you condemn the rage of violence.
Give us courage to take our stand
with all victims of bloodshed and greed,
and, following your servants and prophets,
look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Amen.

God of all the nations,
you rescued your people out of the Red Sea
and delivered Rahab from battle;
you rescue the lowly and needy from injustice and tribulation.
Surround us with so great a cloud of witnesses
that we may have faith to live by your word in our time,
courage to persevere in the race set before us,
and endurance in the time of trial. Amen.

O God you declare your almighty power most chiefly in showing
mercy and pity: mercifully grant to us such a measure of your grace,
that we, running the way of your commandments, may receive your
gracious promises, and be made partakers of your heavenly
treasure; 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. *Common Worship*

God of glory, the end of our searching, help us to lay aside all that
prevents us from seeking your kingdom, and to give all that we
have to gain the pearl beyond all price, through our Saviour Jesus
Christ. *Common Worship Shorter Collect*

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God of the nations, to whose table all are invited and in whose kingdom no one is a stranger: hear the cries of the hungry and mercifully extend to all the peoples on earth the joy of your salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen *Methodist Worship*

To set the earth ablaze, O God, your Son submitted to death on the cross, and from his cup of suffering you call the church to drink. When we are tempted give us strength to run the race that lies before us, and to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen. *Methodist Worship*

You are the great God — he who is in heaven. You are the creator of life, you make the regions above. You are the hunter who hunts for souls. You are the leader who goes before us. You are he whose hands are with wounds. You are he whose feet are with wounds. You are he whose blood is a trickling stream, You are he whose blood was spilled for us. *Prayer of a Xhosa Christian from Africa*

O thou, from whom to be turned is to fall, to whom to be turned is to rise, and in whom to stand is to abide for ever; Grant us in all our duties thy help, in all our perplexities thy guidance, In all our dangers thy protection, And in all our sorrows thy peace; Through Jesus Christ our Lord. *St. Augustine (340—430)*

Father, I am seeking: I am hesitant and uncertain, but will you, O God, watch over each step of mine and guide me. *St. Augustine (354-430)*

Blessed are you, creator of all, to you be praise and glory for ever. As your dawn renews the face of the earth bringing light and life to all creation, may we wake refreshed from the depths of sleep, open our eyes to behold your presence and strengthen our hands to do your will, that the world may rejoice and give you praise. Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Blessed be God forever. (After Lancelot Andrewes, 1626. Common Worship)

Let me know you, my knower; let me know you as I am known. You are the energy in my soul: enter it and shape it to yourself, so that you may hold it as your possession, without fault or blemish. This is

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my hope; this is why I speak as I do. This is the hope that brings me delight; for I delight in the source of my salvation. (*St Augustine 354-430*)

Ever-loving God, your Son Jesus Christ gave Himself as living bread for the life of the world; give us such a knowledge of His presence that we may be strengthened and sustained by His risen life to serve you continually; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen** (New Zealand Prayer Book)

Saviour God, humanity longs to live in peace. We pray for your healing peace; for those racked by guilt or regret, for those caught up in turbulent relationships, for those burdened by illness or sorrow. Humanity longs to live in peace, but not peace at any price. We pray for those who stir up dissension; by questioning the ways of society, by being open and honest, and by searching for the truth. **Amen**

Spirit of God, your church longs to live in peace. We pray for your healing peace; between denominations, within individual churches, in our own hearts. Your church longs to live in peace, but not peace at any price. We pray for those who stir up dissension; disturbing us with new visions and ideas, criticising our apathy and complacency, and provoking us to think afresh about our calling. **Amen** *From Companion to the Revised Common Lectionary, Intercessions, Christine Odell*

Here, O Lord, is my poor heart, an empty vessel ready to be filled with your grace. Here, O Lord, is my sinful soul, waiting to be refreshed by your love. Here, O Lord, is my mouth created for your praise and ready to proclaim the glory of your name, now and for ever. Amen Dwight Lyman Moody, 1837-1899

God, who from old, taught the hearts of your faithful people by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit: grant to us by the same spirit to have a right judgment in all things and to evermore rejoice in his holy comfort. Amen.

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Heavenly Father, help us to live this day and each day, as if it were our last. Amen

Take my body, O Christ, to do your work, for here on earth you have no body now but mine. Take my hands to be your hands and my feet to walk in the ways of your feet. Take my eyes to be the eyes of your own compassion shining forth upon a troubled world; for your own mercy's sake. Amen Teresa of Avila, 1515-1582

God our Father, be near to our children growing up in the peril and confusion of these times. Guard them from the forces of evil at work in our society, and lead them in the paths of goodness and truth; enable us as parents, grandparents, family members or as friends to give them at all times the security of our love and the help of our example and our prayers. Amen (Edward Peck)

O God, you are my God, for you I long;
for you my soul is thirsting.
I long for you like dry, weary land without water.
Give me your strength and your glory.
I wish to praise you all my life fill my soul as with a banquet.
I cling to you; hold me close in your hands.
Psalm 63

Increase your grace in us, O Lord, that we may fear your Name beyond which nothing is more holy; that we may love you, beyond whom nothing is more loveable; that we may glorify you beyond whom nothing is more worthy of praise, and that we may long for you beyond whom nothing is more desirable; and grant that thus fearing, loving, glorifying and longing we may see you, face to face; through Christ our Lord. Amen Desiderius Erasmus, 1466-1536

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

1st Reading Isaiah 5: 1–7 [Pr22A*]
51* Awake, my soul, and with the sun

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Psalm 80: 1–2, 9–20

686* Bless the Lord, the God of our forebears

688* Come, bless the Lord, God of our forebears

695* God of mercy, God of grace

614* Great Shepherd of your people, hear

305 O Breath of life, come sweeping through us

657* O God of Bethel, by whose hand

1st Reading Jeremiah 23: 23–29

381* God has spoken – by his prophets

388* Word of the living God

Psalm 82 [Pr10C]

125* Hail to the Lord's anointed

535* Judge eternal, throned in splendour

140 [The Lord will come and not be slow]

509* Your kingdom come, O God

2nd Reading Hebrews 11: 29– 12: 2

645* Father, hear the prayer we offer

566* Fight the good fight with all thy might

352* Give thanks with a grateful heart

463 Give us the wings of faith to rise

696* God, we praise you! God, we bless you!

417 He gave his life in selfless love

636* May the mind of Christ our Saviour

285* The head that once was crowned with thorns

376* Ye holy angels bright

The Gospel Luke 12: 49–56

550* 'Forgive our sins as we forgive'

639* O thou who camest from above

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