

Sunday July 26th 2020. Reflection on Romans 8.26 – end and Matt. 13.31-33; 44-52

Opening prayer:

Generous God,
you give us gifts and make them grow:
though our faith is small as mustard seed,
make it grow to your glory
and the flourishing of your kingdom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

New Testament Reading: Romans 8.26 – end

The Gospel: Matt. 13.31-33; 44-52

(Both readings can be found on the pewsheet)

Reflection:

How many times in your life have you said something like: “I was left speechless? I couldn’t find the words to express what I felt.”

Quite a few, I suspect, but I wonder whether you’ve ever felt like this in relation to your prayer life. Clearly Paul did, because he felt it important enough to be worth writing about it to the church in Rome. There will be situations, he suggests, when we “don’t know how to pray as we ought.”

So what are those situations?

Perhaps it’s when we can’t find words to express how we feel about God, how much we are overawed by the vastness of the universe which he has created, or how overwhelmed we are by the love he showed in giving his Son to die for us to bring us back into a right relationship with Him

Sometimes it may be that we’re torn between two possibilities, when we hear, for example, that a very elderly person has been diagnosed with terminal cancer – do we pray for their healing or do we pray for a peaceful and pain-free passing?

On other occasions it may be that we feel so overwhelmed by the complexity of the situation that we have no idea what to pray for. I feel that way about climate change and global warming. I know that action is needed and needed swiftly. I know that if we don't take action, it's the developing nations and the less affluent who will suffer most. But I also know that the actions needed are going to be opposed by so many people because of the impact that they will have on their lives that politicians will be reluctant to take them. And anyway, even if our own government bites the bullet, will enough other countries follow suit to make a real difference? And I really don't want to give up that holiday in Madeira, even though I can only get there by flying!

In the end, I tend to hand it all over to God, saying it's up to you, which is another way of saying that I am relying on the Holy Spirit to intercede for me "according to the will of God."

However, there is one thing that I do know that we should pray for, and it's something that we all pray for almost every time we come to church and pray the Lord's Prayer, saying the words "Your kingdom come."

The coming of God's kingdom is what the church exists for. And it's not just our responsibility to pray for its coming.

We're all called to be part of its implementation by living out the values of the kingdom as demonstrated by Jesus, and sharing those values with others. That's one of the things about prayer. As you pray, you sometimes discover that you are part of the answer!

Sometimes, as we wait for the coming of the kingdom, we may find ourselves growing impatient, asking why God doesn't exercise his kingship more obviously. So, for example, we may find ourselves asking, after some horrendous terrorist atrocity, why doesn't God intervene, why doesn't he take control.

Jesus has something to say about that in our reading from Matthew, in those first two parables, when he compares the kingdom of heaven to the slow growth of a mustard seed and the leavening effect of yeast in the baking process. The birds have to wait for the tree to grow before they can seek shelter in its branches, just as the woman has to wait for the yeast to permeate

the dough before she can put it in the oven. So we have to wait until God's good time for him to undertake his promised renewal of the earth.

But these parables have something else to teach us about the nature of God's kingdom, the way it grows from small beginnings. The mustard seed was the smallest of seeds used by the Palestinian farmers and gardeners, but it grew into the largest of garden plants and became a tree. So, too, the Christian faith began with a small band of disciples two thousand years ago, but is now followed by a third of the world's population and is still growing. And just as the yeast permeates the dough, so Christians are to be found throughout the world.

Jesus goes on to teach us something else about God's kingdom in the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great value. And it's not that we can buy our way into the Kingdom of Heaven!

In Jesus' day, there were no banks, so it was not uncommon for people to hide their valuables in the ground. So when someone came upon a treasure hoard of that kind, he knew that in order to have that treasure for himself, he first would have to buy the field, even if that meant selling everything he had of value in order to afford it.

So, too, the merchant had to sell all he had to obtain the one pearl that was really valuable.

But these parables aren't necessarily about how we use our money and material possessions, although they may be if those come between us and our embracing the values of God's kingdom, if they prevent us from doing things God's way.

What they are about, I think, may at first be thought about as sacrifice, but once undertaken is seen to lead to the abundant life that Hazel was talking about a couple of weeks ago and so is no sacrifice at all.

Both these parables are teaching us that once we recognise what it means to be part of God's kingdom, then there is nothing else in our lives that is more important, whether it's possessions, beliefs, hobbies or relationships. And when I talk about relationships, I'm not talking about family. I'm talking about

those relationships that may lead us astray. What my mother used to call “bad company.”

But we have one more parable to consider, the parable that compares the kingdom of heaven to a fishing-net, in which we are the fish, and this is the most challenging parable of them all.

It’s challenging because it has at its centre the idea of separation, and separation is not an idea with which we are comfortable. But if we read the gospels carefully, it’s not one from which we can escape. Just before our gospel reading begins, Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and the weeds, which Ken talked about last week. The parable ends with the weeds being burned, or as Ken said, discarded, and the wheat being taken into the owner’s barns. And later in Matthew’s Gospel we have the separation of the sheep and the goats.

If you think about it, it’s inevitable that this should be so, because if God is totally good and his kingdom is perfect, then there will be no place in it for anything evil. The reading from Revelation, which Hazel talked about a couple of weeks ago, tells us, in relation to God’s renewed world, that nothing accursed will be found there anymore.

Yet we don’t have to look very far in today’s world to see evil at work. I’ve already mentioned terrorist atrocities, but what about child pornography and other forms of abuse, or the genocide that marred the twentieth century, including the Holocaust, and may be happening to the Uighur Muslims in China today.

This idea of separation can also be found in our reading from Romans, where Paul refers to those “who have been called according to God’s purpose,” with the implication that not all are called.

Now we have to be careful not to read into this more than Paul actually meant. I don’t think that Paul is saying that there are those whom God doesn’t call. A God who only called some and predestined the rest to damnation could hardly be called a just and loving God and certainly would not be one whose priest I would want to be. So let’s unpack that a bit.

The God whom we serve is eternal. He was there before the creation of the world. And it was only with creation that time came into being. So God is outside time. Moreover, he has given us freewill – we can make choices, whether they be good or bad. But because he is *outside* time, God knows what will happen *in* time. Consequently, he knows the choices that we will make. He doesn't determine those choices - we still have freewill - but he knows what those choices will be. That's why Paul is able to write, "For those whom God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first born within a large family" – the family of those who share in Jesus' resurrection: that's you and me.

Now I'm able to say that with confidence, because Paul prefaces the comments that I've just been looking at by referring to those who love God. I assume that you wouldn't be here this morning if you didn't love God. And I assume that's also true of those listening online, although I'm not in a position to judge.

Indeed it's not the job of any of us here to make judgements about who has or has not been called by God. As Paul also writes, it is God who searches the heart. And that's not something that we can do. Moreover, as Jesus' comment to the bandit crucified alongside him, that that day he will be with Jesus in paradise, shows, it is never too late to repent.

Our reading from Paul ends with some of the most comforting words in the whole of the New Testament, when Paul writes,

"I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ."

If you remember nothing else from this talk, hold onto that – that as one who loves God, nothing, not even death, can come between you and God's love for you. Amen.

Hymn: "Such love," which can be found using this link:

<https://youtu.be/9R4N2G5RZng> (You may have to skip, or watch, an advert. first!)

Prayer pointers:

That our two churches of St Mary and St Francis may be united in our mission to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to our community here in West Wickham. May our community see us as one body with one voice reaching out in faith and in the love of Christ.

For all scientists working to develop a vaccine to combat Covid19 and for all scientific advisers to Governments around the world. May politicians who make decisions to deal with the pandemic, value and be guided of scientists and other infectious disease specialists.

For all in our churches who, for whatever reason, have found difficulty with online worship. Give thanks that we can now worship together in our buildings. For those who continue online worship that the Holy Spirit may guide them to make online worship more accessible.

For all who work to bring harmony, understanding and equality in our community, especially those working with young and vulnerable people. For harmony in our churches where sometimes there is disunity and misunderstanding. For the Inclusive Church organisation that their work may be blessed.

Closing prayer:

Lord God, whose Son is the true vine and the source of life,
ever giving himself that the world may live:
may we so receive within ourselves
the power of his death and passion
that we may share his glory and be made perfect in his love;
for he is alive and reigns, now and for ever. Amen

And the blessing of God almighty
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Be with you and with those you love,
now and for evermore. Amen

