

ST. MARY OF NAZARETH /ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI – WEST WICKHAM

26th July 2020: Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Hazel writes:

There may be many reasons why you are connected with St Francis' or St Mary's church and the past few months may have highlighted what these are. For those who came to St Francis' last week, you may have been reminded of what it is that you particularly value about worship in a church building, whether or not that was available on Sunday. Maybe it's the opportunity to worship with others or the social interaction. Is it something about the space itself, that you feel gives glory to God? Is it the words of the liturgy spoken in that space, or hearing some music? Maybe you missed being able to sing yourself. Or was it the ability to receive communion in a physical form that you've most missed.

I have asked those who are keeping in touch with everyone in the congregations to be in contact over the next couple of weeks to find out what it is that you value and therefore how best we can keep in touch moving forwards. It would also be very helpful if you were able to share the details of any other resources that you've found useful – we might collate these into an article in the next magazine.

Next week there will be a service of **Holy Communion** on Sunday 2nd August at 10am in St Francis' Church.

The church buildings will continue to be **open for private prayer** in July at the following times:

- Mondays – St Mary's from 10.30am to 12noon
- Tuesdays – St Mary's from 2 to 3.30pm
- Wednesdays – St Francis' from 2 to 3.30pm
- Thursdays – St Francis' from 10.30am to 12noon
- Fridays – St Mary's from 9 to 10.30am
- Saturdays – St Francis' from 9 to 10.30am

After this next week, during August we will have St Francis' open on a Tuesday afternoon from 2 to 3.30pm and St Mary's will be open on a Thursday morning from 10 to 11.30am. The normal Quiet Hour at St Francis will be likely to resume from 9 to 10am on a Saturday from September.

The **St Francis' APCM** will take place after the service on Sunday 20th September. The venue is to be decided (in church or on Zoom). Everyone is welcome to join us at this meeting, but only those who are on the electoral roll can vote for matters that need approval, such as new members of the PCC. If you would like to be added to the

electoral roll, please would you contact our Electoral Roll Officer, Rowena Griffiths at rowena.griff19@btinternet.com or on 020 8777 6112 before Sunday 30th August.

We are in need of a **metal detector**, for a job at St Mary's church. If you know of one that we could borrow for a day or two, please contact Dave Taylor (07712 167516), who can collect and return.

Please do bring **Foodbank donations** to the Vicarage. Currently they need long-life fruit juice, squash, cold meat, mash potato packets, custard, rice pudding, jam, biscuits, men's toiletries, clothes wash detergent and nappies (sizes 5&6). There are large stocks of pasta, beans, soup, UHT milk, rice and tomatoes and these items are politely discouraged at the present time. Thank you for your continuing support.

Resources and updates for the week ahead – An audio file of the sermon and a video of the service have been posted to the websites for today. All other files have been combined and posted as a pew sheet which has been sent on paper to those who have told us that they are not on-line. Other worship and resources that you might want to listen to or look at on Sunday:

- The Church of England's national virtual service will be available on their website at www.churchofengland.org.
- The BBC have the following programmes to watch and listen to:
 - Sunday Worship at 8.10am on Radio 4 themed on hope, while preparing for a virtual Keswick Convention;
 - Choral Evensong at 3pm on Radio 3 from St Alban's Church, Holborn;
 - On BBC 1: Sunday Morning Live at 10am and Songs of Praise at 1.15pm on Crosby Beach, Merseyside.

Each week our "**coffee/tea & chat**" on Thursday at 2.30 pm is an opportunity to share with others. It is just 40 minutes and you don't need to commit to joining each week. Please let Rowena (rowena.griff19@btinternet.com /020 8777 6112) know if you would like the log-in details.

Any items for the joint pew sheet to Hazel and items for the websites to brian.griff19@btinternet.com.

Collect

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.

First Reading: Romans 8:26-end

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes,

who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Gospel: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

³¹ Jesus put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'

³³ He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

⁴⁴ 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid;

then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵ 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

⁴⁷ 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹ 'Have you understood all this?' They answered, 'Yes.' ⁵² And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'

Post Communion 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, in his saving cup, we may share his glory and be made perfect in his love; for he is alive and reigns, now and for ever.

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.

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 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 Covid-19 and for all scientific advisers to Governments around the world. May politicians who make decisions to deal with the pandemic value and be guided by the advice of scientists and other infectious disease specialists.

For all in our two 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 to develop 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 for those working with young, 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