



Revd Ro's Reflection on Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Proper 12

Year A

Matthew 13.31-33,44-52

Romans 8.26-39

Matthew collects the parables of Jesus at the heart of his gospel. We have looked at the sower and the wheat and the weeds. Interestingly the small parables, or rather illustrations of the mustard seed and the yeast, are actually enclosed within the story of the wheat and the weeds before the explanation to the disciples.

I remember when I was about twelve I went to France with the school. I also remember earning my £10 spending money by potato picking, an illustration of hard work if ever there was! We stayed in a French boarding school while the pupils were away and a few of their teachers remained. We had French lessons each morning. My French was, and is, hopeless but I remember going out to the teacher's desk on one occasion and being asked to read a sentence. He then asked, 'Do you understand that?' to which I replied, 'Yes.' I will never forget the quizzical look he gave me. Actually it happened that, for a wonder, I did.

Jesus tells the crowd the parables in this gospel reading then he asks that huge question, 'Have you understood all this?' and they immediately answer, 'Yes.' I can imagine him giving them that same quizzical look. After the parables the disciples immediately ask Jesus, 'Explain the parable of...'. Understanding never comes instantly. The parables can be read on so many levels and you need to work at them. It is true that the illustrations are vivid and familiar, his listeners would have recognised the setting of each story, but to understand the real meaning is quite a different thing. Jesus will use the illustration of the mustard seed again in Matthew 17.20 'If you had faith as small as a mustard seed.'

At the beginning of the COVID crisis, when lockdown was firmly in place, life completely changed. I remember the programme 'Gardener's World' when the presenters' families had to do the filming so a programme could be compiled. The public sent in films too. One lady said she wanted to grow

food but had no seeds. At that time the only journey allowed was for food, so she saved her tomato and pepper seeds and even picked the tiny seeds from a strawberry. After a lot of work and TLC they grew into sturdy little plants for her garden. I suppose Jesus is saying, 'From little acorns mighty oak trees grow,' but not without a lot of work on our part. We receive the word of God, but we have to work at nurturing Jesus' ways lifelong to bring the kingdom of heaven to fruition in our lives; indeed, as Paul was saying last week, to further God's new redeemed creation. Conversely the weeds we allow to grow in our lives hamper the ways of Jesus.

Actually the mustard seed Jesus is referring to is nothing like our mustard and cress or the yellow plant that makes our mustard. The mustard of Palestine is exactly as Jesus describes and it does grow into a large bush. The image of the tree was central to the scriptures, the tree in the garden, the tree of life and of course as a symbol of a great nation whose roots and branches spread over the world.

'The kingdom of heaven is like this,' is repeated at the beginning of each parable. Jesus is not talking of a celestial place he is talking about the kingdom being available here and now; the kingdom as a state of being children of God, available to us if we accept it in faith and live it out in our lives. The kingdom cannot happen unless the words of Jesus are taken out into the world and people accept them. One interpretation is then: the spread of the gospel of Jesus from twelve poor men throughout the entire globe is like the tiny seed growing into a tree. Another would be that Jesus comes with the good news of the kingdom, with the word of God, for those who accept his teachings. Thus their entire lives are changed into his way and the kingdom is established within them. Their world and ways are completely changed into Jesus's way. Change and transformation is the key to these parables; change to the world and its ways, and change within us.

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.'

On one occasion when I was taking an assembly at Flaxhill, I was making a harvest loaf with them. It was a bit of a Blue Peter, 'and here is one I prepared earlier.' In one bowl I had a lump of flat dough; in another warm box, a bowl of leavened bread dough which had forced the lid off the bowl. The 'WOW,' when I took it out was exactly what I wanted.

This short illustration of the bread is interesting in that Jesus' images are usually masculine, in that they refer to the work men would be doing, fishing, farming and so on. But this is a domestic one, women's work. The word of God is available in Jesus, ignore it, reject it and your life will remain a flat lump. Accept it and everything is changed; prepare to have your world turned upside down. God is within every one of us. The picture of the 'Light of the world' by Holman Hunt is not exactly accurate. Here Jesus knocks at the door of our heart to come in. That is ok on one level but actually the Spirit of God is within us. The challenge is what we will do about it.

Jesus' image is better than our familiar one of yeast because in those days the leaven would be a bit of the sour dough left over from a previous baking, in other words the leaven already within. The seed of God's transforming word is given like that raising agent to humanity and if we act on it, it will change us forever. For the bread to rise we need warm water and a warm environment too. In other words the leaven is the word of God which we accept, but we also have to act out if that transformation is to take place; if the Kingdom of God is to dwell within us and spread like the branches of that tree throughout the world. The way of Jesus means not only transformation in our own lives but also in the whole world, whose values Christianity challenged and changed forever as it spread throughout the world.

The next three parables are a bit different in that they are a challenge to us. In all of them the characters have to do something, they have to take action. That is true of everyone who accepts the way of Jesus.

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.'

The treasure in the field reminds me of the young man who says to Jesus, (Luke 18.18) 'Teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus' reply is, 'Obey the commandments.' So he had done, but that is not enough. Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Sadly the man slinks off. In this parable the man not only recognises the treasure in Jesus' message, but goes out and sells everything to possess it. He did something about it. So too with the pearl, the symbol of purity and perfection, the man sells all his other pearls to possess this one. He puts aside all other things to possess the one priceless thing.

Jesus, in the last illustration, is not talking of hell fire and damnation, as we saw last week. He is talking of those who follow him possessing the kingdom of heaven and those who reject it losing that. It is the image of the fishermen dragging their net behind the boat then pulling the net ashore to examine their catch. Many of the crowd would be familiar with this, maybe doing it day by day as the disciples had done. Now their task was to 'Fish for people.'

The good fish are those who accept the word of God and who do something about it. Maybe the separation of the fish, if applied to each one of us, is our honest examination of our lives. We do have faith, we try to follow Jesus but there is a challenge. What in your lives would Jesus not approve of? Or to put it another way, in the words of the WWJD bracelet, 'what would Jesus do.' Or to reverse it, would Jesus do that? 'Faith without works is nothing.' (James 2.7) or 'If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.' (Corinthians 13.2). Of course there will be judgement, in God's newly created order Jesus will return as King and judge.

Jesus wants us to examine ourselves and throw out all that is not attuned to his way of love, then and only then, can his 'kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.' We are the scribes of the passage; if we accept the treasure of Jesus we must examine our lives and keep only the treasure, throwing the secret sins and meanness away. Like nurturing plants it takes hard work, but the results are the fruits of the spirit within us and lives lived with Jesus in his kingdom on earth.

I have chosen to look at the gospel first because Romans begins with the sentence ^{8.26} 'Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness.' That follows on exactly from Jesus' message. We are fallible human beings, we will fall short but we are responsible for our actions too. We must not choose the other path or to do wrong deliberately. We are weak but God's Spirit dwells within us to guide and strengthen us. The next part is so beautiful; it is one of my favourite passages from the bible.

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 the mind of the Spirit is 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.'

We would have trouble bettering the phrase, 'but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.' Indeed, to try to adequately explain this is impossible. It is, to quote George Herbert's poem Prayer, 'something understood.' We feel the wonder of this in the depth of our being. Paul

recognises the presence of God's Spirit within us enabling us to pray when all we have is inarticulate longing. Or, if the world is too much to understand or it hurts so deep we just don't know how to express our prayers for the world, the Holy Spirit within intercedes for us. More simply, God knows our very thoughts.

Our relationship with God centres on our prayer. It is like in our human relationships, we communicate with that person or, quite often, if we are close enough, we can just be silent. That is true of prayer. George Herbert's poem, 'Prayer', seeks to examine this. It is a wonderful poem and well worth reading. I love it, especially the line, 'God's breath in man returning to his birth.' Now that is what St. Paul is saying in a nutshell.

The parables we have just looked at and the Romans reading from last week are illustrated in this line, 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.' This demands trust in God, it is very like Julian of Norwich who was shown by God that, 'All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.' All those who accept God's word are called to work within themselves and the world for his kingdom values to be established.

The next lines are easily misread:

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.'

It does not mean that God predestined one part of humanity for salvation and others to be lost souls. That would not follow from the verse we have just looked at, let alone the gospel's message of love. We know the truth is that ALL humanity is created by God and loved by him. But humans have free will to accept or reject him, to turn to Christ or turn to sin. We have only to look at the world both then and now to see the results of sin. But those who do follow Jesus will become children of God and heirs with Jesus – 'in the image of his Son.' God made us in his image; that image has been marred but Jesus came to restore humanity.

The next verses contain some of the most inspiring words of St. Paul.

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.'

Paul was writing at a time of persecution, he was suffering himself. Persecution of Christians is still going on. These words must have inspired countless generations. God loved us so much he came in the second person of the trinity, showing such love for us that he died for us and won eternal life for us by his resurrection. 'If God is for us who can be against us,' is wonderful for every Christian. It applies as much to us in our lives as to those who are persecuted. If what we do is of God, it does not matter what others think or do, that is our justification and the measuring stick of our behaviour. God will be with us throughout, close beside us and strengthening us. People may condemn you or oppose you but if you are doing what Jesus requires then that is all that counts.

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?'

Paul knows of the awful persecution people will face (Psalm 44.22) 'For your sake we are being killed all day long,' but says, 'Nothing will separate us from the love of God.' That is God's wonderful

promise to every person who truly turns to him. Nothing and no one gets in the way of God's love for us. Whatever people do to you, if God is with you he will strengthen you and never leave you.

The last paragraph is familiar; it is part of the funeral service,

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.'

It is there because it is the ultimate promise of God, 'Lo I am with you always even to the end of the age.' Those who have died are united in Christ and will become part of the newly created order. God is with us and loves us more than we can know. That personal loving relationship with God is one of the wonderful joys of Christianity. Our responsibility is to live it out in our lives and in our relationships with other people.

*'Prayer, the Church's banquet, angel's age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,'* 'Prayer' George Herbert

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