

Seventh Sunday after Trinity 26 July 2020

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.

Readings

First Reading 1 Kings 3:5-12

At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, 'Ask for whatever you want me to give you.'

⁶ Solomon answered, 'You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.

⁷ 'Now, LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. ⁸ Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. ⁹ So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?'

¹⁰ The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. ¹¹ So God said to him, 'Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, ¹² I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.

Second Reading Romans 8:26-39

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who^[i] have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written:

'For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'^[ii]

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, neither angels nor demons,^[k] neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Gospel Matthew 13:31-33. 44-52

³¹ He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³² Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.'

³³ He told them still another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about thirty kilograms of flour until it worked all through the dough.'

⁴⁴ 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in

his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

⁴⁵ 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

⁴⁷ 'Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸ When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹ This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹ 'Have you understood all these things?' Jesus asked.

'Yes,' they replied.

⁵² He said to them, 'Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old'.

Reflections

Jesus' often taught in parables – a story that gives an insight into the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. Each of today's parables revolves around things hidden: a mustard seed that requires sowing to germinate; yeast that is mixed ("hid" in some translations) to be effective; buried treasure; a pearl that must be searched for; fish trawled from the depths of the sea. Out of the tiny, the insignificant, the hidden, the kingdom of heaven blossoms.

There is a surfeit of abundance in this blossoming. The mustard seed, which at best grows to an annual bush nine feet high, is transformed into a mighty tree, which shelters all the birds of the air. The yeast is added to three measures of flour which produces enough bread to feed a small village. The hidden treasure and the great pearl are worth everything that their finders possess, and the net thrown into the sea catches fish of every kind.

More than that, the kingdom is derived from ordinary people's daily toil – farming, home-making, commerce, fishing – not the actions of political, military or religious powerbrokers. It is not a kingdom of borders but of shelter – all the birds of the air are welcome in its branches; fish of every kind are caught in its net. It offers abundant food to every resident. The parables of the hidden treasure and the great pearl link back to Solomon in the Kings reading – the kingdom also values wisdom over riches and earthly power.

Many of the images Jesus uses in his parables would have been drawn from his personal experiences. Most were familiar to his hearers and often held a number of associations for them. Amongst these vignettes, one image stands out for me - the image of the pearl. Why is it a pearl? Why not a ruby or an emerald or a sapphire? Surely a diamond had more value? Why does Jesus use the image of the pearl?

In ancient Jewish culture, pearls had a curious mythology – they were believed to be the tears Adam and Eve shed as they were banished from the Garden of Eden. White and pink pearls were Eve's tears, whilst the black pearls were Adam's tears since men were supposed to cry less than women. To that early audience, the precious pearl held associations of sorrow and lost innocence; as a tool of the Master Storyteller amidst his collection of stories, it also hints at redemption and salvation.

It is an image that stands the test of time amazingly well. Those first hearers had no idea of the biological processes that formed the pearl. Today we understand that the oyster responds to the pain of an irritant by producing layers of nacre (aka mother of pearl) which soothes the pain. Hence what was a source of pain to the oyster becomes something precious and beautiful.

So it is with us. We are living through a particularly tough period at present. These past few months have seen trials and pains that we never imagined might invade our world. Lives have been turned upside down, families torn apart, our comfortable existences shattered by an invisible force, yet life goes on. The Bible often tells how we become refined by our experiences and, like the pearl, at the end of periods of trial, something beautiful will come into being. As we begin to emerge from the trials of lockdown, there has been much talk of the 'new normal' and what that may look like. Many speculate the outcome will be a more balanced society that values relationships over things and which treats the earth with greater respect. A society embarked on a path that will see an end to poverty and hunger and where there is justice for all. A society that is not at all unlike the Kingdom Jesus refers to in his parables.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like.....

Rev Jenny Ellis