

Readings for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

30th July 2023

First Reading: Genesis 29:15-28

Laban said to Jacob, 'Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?' Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, 'I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.' Laban said, 'It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.' So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

Then Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.' So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?' Laban said, 'This is not done in our country – giving the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.' Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

Second Reading: Romans 8:26-39

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. 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. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. 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. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 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? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 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. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, 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 Jesus our Lord.

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

Jesus put before the crowd another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and

sowed in his field; 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.'

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.'

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.

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

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

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.'

A Reflection for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

When I was quite small, my sisters and I used to grow mustard and cress on damp paper towel on the windowsill, and then enjoy eating the tiny plants that germinated. It was probably a ploy of my mother's to get us to eat more greens! Perhaps because of that experience, I remember being fascinated by the first of Jesus' short parables, images of the Kingdom of Heaven, in today's Gospel passage. The seeds were, indeed, small and quite hard to handle, but the little seedlings we grew were hard to reconcile with a mustard plant the size of a tree in which birds could build their nests, something more akin to Jack and the beanstalk.

If we had potted up our mustard seedlings and let them grow on, they would have become quite reasonable sized plants or shrubs. Mustard, of which there are several varieties, is a brassica, which originated in the Middle East and would have been common along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. However, for it to reach the size of a tree would have been very, very unusual.

Over the last few weeks, our Gospel readings have taken us through the parables of Jesus about the kingdom of heaven in Matthew, chapter 13. Two weeks ago, we heard the parable of the sower with its emphasis on the importance of the right growing conditions for the kingdom to flourish and bear a rich harvest. Last week was the parable of the wheat and the weeds with its reminders that there are plenty of weeds threatening to choke out the kingdom of heaven, but also with its warning of judgment to come and assurance that God's kingdom will win out in the end. And today, we have five very short parables, small illustrations of God's kingdom, which collectively show the abundance of God's kingdom.

The abundance of God's kingdom is out of all proportion to human effort, abundance beyond our imagination. As I have already mentioned, a mustard plant the size of a tree is beyond all expectation, but it is able to provide a place of shelter and welcome for the birds. In the second parable, yeast is mixed into flour to prepare the dough for bread

and enable it to rise. Three measures of flour sounds innocuous, but represents a very large quantity – estimates suggest enough for about a hundred loaves of bread, enough for a feast. Both these images show that from small, seemingly insignificant beginnings, the tiny mustard seed or a small quantity of yeast, God’s kingdom will grow out of all proportion. In both cases, the growth is transformative for good, providing shelter and welcome in the first and abundant food in the second. But in both, the process takes time and, therefore, patience.

Then we have two parables or images of the infinite value of the kingdom of heaven. The treasure hidden in the field was of such value it was worth risking everything for, even if we might think the tactics employed, re-hiding it, were a little dubious. And the merchant who discovered a pearl of equally astounding value, a pearl that was not just good but unique, sold all he had to possess it. The treasure seems to have been an accidental discovery, the pearl the result of a deliberate search, but in each case, to gain the kingdom, they were prepared to give everything.

And finally, we have the parable of the dragnet which has similarities with the parable of the wheat and the weeds last week. The net gathers fish of every kind – the kingdom is open to absolutely everyone, no exceptions - but when it is drawn ashore, there will be a sorting, a judgment. The kingdom of heaven is not forced upon us, we must choose God’s abundant love and grace. If we reject it, we will be separated from God and lose our identity as a child of God.

These parables conclude with a very brief exchange with the disciples: ‘Have you understood all this?’ ‘Yes’, they reply. Had they really? There is a great deal in these parables for them and us to get our heads around.

All these parables together, including those from the past two weeks, tell us that the kingdom of heaven is of supreme value but is hard to find and harder to respond to. Some recognise God’s presence and respond, others reject it, and yet others don’t see it.

Unlike the disciples, put on the spot by Jesus’ question, Paul had time to think and reflect on Jesus’ teachings and revelations and to work out his theology. His letter to the Romans, unlike his other letters, was written to a church that he had not founded and had not yet visited. Although he may have had acquaintances there, he is writing mainly to strangers. It is thought to have been written quite late in his ministry, although before any of the Gospels, and is a summary of his developed thoughts. Chapter 8, which we have also been working our way through over these past three weeks, is the climax of his argument, and today’s passage is the climax of the chapter and of Paul’s entire theology.

This passage is brimming with words of encouragement:

‘The Spirit helps us in our weakness.’

‘The Spirit intercedes ... according to the will of God.’

‘All things work together for good for those who love God.’

‘If God is for us, who is against us?’

‘[God] did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us.’

‘Christ Jesus ... intercedes for us.’

‘[Nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

One commentator summed this up as saying: ‘As children of God, made so by faith in Christ’s sacrifice, we can have confidence in our future salvation and assurance for our present challenges.’ Children of God are those who respond to God and become heirs, receiving the abundance of God’s love and grace illustrated in today’s parables.

This is not a message of blind optimism. Paul himself knew pain, suffering and persecution and we all have to work out how to live faithfully in the midst of such circumstances. It does not suggest that such things are intended by God, or that they are in some way good in themselves, but rather that God can use them for good. We see an example of that in today's passage from Genesis. Jacob, who tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright, and having tried to overturn the customs of the society of the time, is in turn tricked by his uncle Laban. Yet God's promises of succession are fulfilled, despite the human deception and the anguish that resulted from it, but not because of it.

At the end of today's Gospel, Jesus, having taught his disciples about the kingdom of heaven, invites them, and us and all his followers with them, to become students of God's kingdom. He invites us to draw on the abundance of the kingdom, God's wisdom old and new, past and present, in the words of Scripture and the insights of today, and to live our lives faithfully, for God and for the good of the world. And, if we feel daunted by our own insignificance, we should remember the mustard seed and not underestimate what God can do through us.