

July 26th 2020 Sermon for 7th Sunday after Trinity –

Rev Tony Rindl, Vicar of St Mary's Church Watford

Bible Reading Romans 8: 26-end

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

And so let us pray. May the words that I speak be faithful to the written word and lead us to the living word who is Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Our Gospel reading today contains a number of parables told by Jesus and they each begin with the phrase “the kingdom of heaven is like...” And there is much for us to learn and discover from this passage. Indeed the concept of discovering is key to our understanding of this passage. You will remember Josh spoke a few weeks ago on a passage in an earlier chapter of Matthew's Gospel which included the verse “At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes Father for this is what you are pleased to do.’” In that sermon Josh spoke of a child's capacity to learn and absorb information. That a child has a sense of innocence, that just delights in discovering new things.

I remember when my sister's twins were really young going on a walk with them. A walk that even with their tiny feet should have only taken twenty minutes. But being three or four years old, they had to stop and look at everything; from a tiny insect scurrying across the path, to a dandelion growing on the edge. Everything was exciting and new. They were completely absorbed in what they were doing, no concept of time and no concern as to what anyone else thought about what they were doing. Just the sheer joy of discovering new things.

It's no wonder that Jesus when asked “who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” replied “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” As Josh said in his sermon, the innocent child has no concept of greatness and has not bought into the worldly values of status and success. And is free simply to make discoveries and to enjoy.

So, discovering is key to our reading today. We see that perhaps most clearly in the middle part of the reading. “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. Again the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls When he found one of great value he went away and sold everything he had, and bought it.” So the kingdom of heaven is here, but we just don't see it, as it is hidden from our sight. We are invited to go and look, and find it for ourselves.

I'm reminded of the story of a Pastor of a small chapel in a remote part of Wales. He believed that he was being asked by God to lead his small congregation in an all-night prayer vigil. And he was delighted when they readily agreed to join him in the chapel. At eight o'clock in the evening there were a number of people in church. By nine o'clock some had already begun to make their excuses and had gone home. By ten o'clock the last member of the congregation had left the building. The Pastor was left on his own and his mood reflected the dark gloomy night. Sometime later around midnight rather disillusioned

he decided to go outside to stretch his legs. By this time the clouds had cleared and he was treated to the wonders of a night sky full of thousands of brightly shining stars. It was one of those moments that revealed something of the greatness of God's creation. And he saw it very much as a sign of God's encouragement. He also reflected on how the stars had always been there. It was just that they had been hidden by the clouds. In the same way the kingdom is there and has always been there, but is so often hidden from us. But when the clouds lift, what joy there is in our discovery.

The man who discovers the treasure buried in the field sells everything in order to buy the field and have the treasure. The merchant discovers the pearl and sells everything in order to buy that pearl. Can you imagine discovering treasure that is worth more than everything you possess. Or a pearl of such great value that you are prepared to sell everything in order to have it. And let's not forget that the pearl grows inside the oyster shell, and until that shell is opened no one knows the value of what lies inside.

The kingdom of heaven is the dwelling place of God, and we are encouraged to seek it out and find it for ourselves. The Prophet Jeremiah says "Seek God and you will find him. Seek him with all your heart and he will reveal himself to you." We are encouraged to seek out the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus himself said "Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives. The one who seeks finds. And the one who knocks, the door will be opened." Primarily Jesus is talking about seeking and finding the kingdom.

Jesus told another parable of the lost coin and the poor widow who has lost the coin, looking everywhere, sweeping out the house until she finds the coin. And what rejoicing when she does indeed find the coin.

We are all made to be in a loving relationship with God. We are made to be part of his kingdom. And we are restless and something is profoundly missing in our lives, until we find what we are looking for. St Paul writes that we see only in part, and we know only in part, but there comes a day when the partial comes to an end, and we will know fully even as we are fully known and loved by God. Until then we keep seeking.

Every child likes a game of hide and seek, and there is an element of that in our walk of faith, and discovering more of the kingdom for ourselves. In playing the game we are drawn into an ever deeper awareness of God and the kingdom that he calls us to be part of.

From the smallest seed, the mustard seed, the kingdom grows. And from the tiniest seed of faith our awareness of the kingdom grows.

So we will now pause for another song and when we come back we will look at the rest of our reading and reflect on what helps in our discovery of God's kingdom and also what we need to lose or leave behind in order for us to enter more fully into the kingdom of heaven. In the meantime let us remember the sheer joy of discovering the kingdom for ourselves and in the words of Jeremiah, "Seek and you will find. Seek with all your heart, and God will reveal himself to you." So let us once again open our hearts to worship God as we keep on seeking.

A rich young man once asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to enter the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus' reply was to tell the rich young man to sell everything he possessed and give the money to the poor. He went on to say that it was harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, than for a camel to go through the eye of the needle. Many biblical commentators have speculated that Jesus was talking about a very narrow gate in the walled city of Jerusalem that was known as the eye of the needle. And if the merchant's camel was laden with all sorts of baggage then the camel would be too wide to go through the narrow gap in the wall. So the merchant would have to take off the baggage in order to get the camel through.

So what is stopping us from entering into the kingdom of heaven? What baggage do we need to remove from our lives? What causes us to be distracted so that we cannot live the way God wants us to live? What clouds our vision, so that we cannot see for ourselves the kingdom of heaven and the plans that God has for each one of us.

When we read the parable of the net and how the net is lowered into the lake and catches all kinds of fish, some good, some bad. Or when we think of the parable of the weeds which was our reading last week, where the wheat and the weeds grow up together because it is hard to separate the good from the bad until they are fully grown. There is a tendency for us to think of good fish and bad fish as being individuals, and some people are weeds and some people are wheat. And like the sheep and the goats in yet another of Jesus' parables, the good people enter and the bad people are left outside.

Now I guess ultimately that is the case, but truth be told most of us are a mixture of good and bad. We have good points that truly reflect that we are made in the image of God and that our natural home is heaven, but the image is often marred by what we call sin, the things that separate us from God. So in many ways it is more about what do we have to get rid of? what needs to change? And like the camel and the eye of the needle, what is the baggage that stops us from entering the kingdom of heaven or seeing the reality of the kingdom in our lives?

Elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus says to enter the kingdom of heaven we need to be born again of water and the spirit. We see water as a cleansing agent that washes us, cleans us. And we talk about the Holy Spirit being the sanctifier working in us, changing us, so that we become more like Jesus, that we possess the character of Jesus in our lives and that we bear fruit that are consistent with the values of the kingdom. In our baptism we talk about dying to sin and rising to new life in Christ. That is the symbolism when a person goes under the water and then rises again. Dying to sin and rising to new life in Christ. Or when the water is poured over the baby exactly the same, before they are handed back to the mother and father who promise that they will raise that child in faith. Baptism is the beginning of the journey of faith. A journey a bit like the tiny mustard seed that if allowed to grow properly will grow into a tall tree where the birds can perch on the branches as Jesus says in his parable.

Jesus also talked about the yeast acting through the dough causing it to rise and produce a good batch of bread. That tiny amount of yeast that can transform the whole batch of dough. Those who heard Jesus speak of such things may well have been surprised at what Jesus was saying. Because often the yeast can become contaminated and if this is the case would ruin the batch.

So all the time we are being challenged to get rid of the bad, all that is harmful, all that stops good growth from happening. All that contaminates and hinders us from seeing and seeking out the kingdom of heaven.

So as I bring my talk to a close I leave you with that question. What will help you to grow in your faith and walk with Jesus? What will help you to see more clearly the reality of God's kingdom? What will bring you true joy? What is more of value to you than all wealth? And what do you need to change in order to be part of God's kingdom?

So what is stopping you from seeing the joys of God's kingdom? What is stopping you from being part of God's plan and being part of his kingdom? Ultimately Jesus is claiming that the kingdom is here. Here on earth. So what is stopping you from seeing it and enjoying it and entering into it. What is good in your life? What is bad? What is healthy? What is poisonous? What brings you life and joy? What destroys life?

Let us pray. Loving Father we thank you for the seed of faith that you have planted in our lives. We pray that that seed may grow to bear much fruit. Fruit of your kingdom; love, joy and peace. Help us to lose those things that hinder our spiritual growth and help us to embrace those things that will help us to become more like you, and for us to see for ourselves the joys of your kingdom that you promise to all who believe and turn to you. Amen.