

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection

7th Sunday after Trinity – 26th July 2020

Canon David Pickering

Words that occur in the verse following our gospel passage this morning: Matthew 13.53 *“When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.*

Over the past three weeks our gospel readings from Matthew 13 have taken us through the seven parables of this chapter of the first gospel. Two weeks ago we heard about the sower; last Sunday, continuing the agricultural theme, the parable of the weeds. Today we had the rich variety of the final five parables; the mustard seed, the leaven, the treasure, the pearl and the net.

In all of these there is a reference to the kingdom of heaven, Matthew’s term for the kingdom of God. Each one tells us something important about the kingdom of Heaven-God; not necessarily in allegorical terms, but in more general terms arising out of our faith relationship with God, or wherever we may find ourselves on our journey.

Sadly, two weeks ago, our gospel reading omitted the important verse, *“To you it has been given to know the secrets (or mysteries) of the kingdom of heaven.”* (Matthew 13.11) Each time we hear, read or reflect on a parable there will often be a new message. As Jamie reminded us a couple of weeks ago, the word parable is related to the Greek ‘parabola’. These words of Jesus are subtle and open to a rich variety of interpretations. They don’t come at us directly and the message we receive will depend on where we are in our faith life at the time.

Over the past couple of weeks the gospel reading has presented a single parable for our reflection and thoughts. Today we are presented with no less than five. But, fear not! Instead of reflecting on individual parables, I’d like us to focus on their collective nature and variety - a rich variety we see in other parts of today’s lectionary.

In our New Testament passage from the end of Romans 8, St Paul gives us a variety of assurances of our security in the love of God. He writes, *‘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.'

In pastoral ministry, I've always found this a helpful text to discuss with people going through difficult times. It assures us of the sincerity and honesty of God's love, a love that it is there for us in the whole variety of situations that life, and even death, can throw at us.

I'm sure it's a text that we've needed over the past few months, as we've tried to see our way through the continuing pandemic. For most of us, our daily lives have been turned upside down, affecting relationships, our outlook on life, even how we face up to the new challenges of the present time. And again most of us may be finding that we've never needed more the assurance of God's love.

Our psalmist this morning also seems certain of the love God, as he reflects on and delights in living his life according to the will of God. Because of its length it's easy to shy away from Psalm 119. Yet it is uniquely rich. The 176 verses are divided up into 22 eight-verse stanzas. Cleverly, for literary effect, in each group of eight, the verse begins with the same Hebrew letter, and the groups themselves form the order of the alphabet. Today's lectionary provides us with eight verses from the seventeenth stanza. My Old Testament lecturer summed it up as: *"The psalmist hymns the Law as a storehouse of wisdom and light; he prays for continued opportunity to share these good things."*

This reflects the general tenor and theme of the whole psalm: throughout the 176 verses there is a repetition of a rich variety of eight words that express the psalmist's understanding of the Divine Will: *"word," "law," "testimonies," "precepts," "statutes," "commandments," "ordinances," "way."* One or other of these words occurs in every verse of the psalm - one long pouring out of the heart that loves the divine will of God.

In the sixth century, when apportioning how the psalms should be ordered in the monastic hours of prayer, St Benedict set Psalm 119 for the lesser hours of Prime, Terce, Sext and None for Sunday and Monday. The monks were to begin their week praising and delighting in the will of God in this rich and varied psalmody. As a theological student at Kelham, under the auspices of the Anglican Order of the Society of the Sacred Mission, we as students joined the members of the community for the midday office of Sext, reciting verses 81 to 128 of Psalm 119 each day, doubling up the stanzas to make three psalms.

Psalm 119, with the rest of the Psalter, have been at the core of daily worship down the ages and have provided a rich and varied expression of our relationship with God. The traditional monastic orders recite the entirety of the Psalter each week. From Reformation times, the Book of Common Prayer set out a pattern for their complete recital at Morning and Evening Prayer over thirty days. Liturgical developments of the past fifty years have found a place for psalms in the lectionary for the Eucharist, and this is good, for within them we encounter the whole range of our human existence in relation to God.

St. Paul writes of the varied depths of the love of God. The parables show us the many ways in which we are to live out our lives in accord with the Kingdom of Heaven-God.

It was the nineteenth century poet, William Cowper, who coined the phrase *variety is the spice of life* in his poem *The Task*. He actually wrote, *Variety is the very spice of life, that gives it all its flavour*. For us in our Christian life, we find its full flavour when we draw on the deep variety of experience that God presents to us each and every day.

In her *A Reading of the Parables of Jesus*, Ruth Etchells quotes John Bunyan. Responding to criticism of his use of allegory in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, he wrote:

..... Were not God's laws,
His gospel laws, in olden times held forth
By shadows, types and metaphors?
God speaketh to him; and happy is he
That finds the light and grace that in them be.

Ruth Etchells comments: *'through the Holy Spirit, God is himself active in the metaphor'*. On our journey with Christ, his wonderful gift of these parables allows us to see ever-increasing depths of meaning as the Holy Spirit opens up his words within us. What a treasure house we have within the parables and the psalms! We may well find ourselves living through strange times - but these are circumstances that have given many of us more opportunity for reflection. Let us pray for eagerness to reflect and for understanding, for a mind ready to be moved by the Holy Spirit, and for a heart to love the richness and diversity of God's glorious creation.

To him be glory and praise, now and for ever. Amen.