

Sunday 30 July 2023, Trinity 8, Year A, Proper 12
1 Kings 3.5-12, Romans 8:26-39, Matthew 13.31-33, 44-52

Once again we are being served rich fare through the readings from Holy Writ, the Holy Scriptures appointed, as we hear King Solomon pray for wisdom that he might rule wisely, as we hear Paul write to the church in Rome about the need to pray led by the Spirit dwelling within us as those predestined by God and as we hear Jesus teaching about the Kingdom of heaven, which is the kingdom of God by the extensive use of parables, while preaching from a boat off the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

What do we make of it all? This strange and perplexing world into which we enter week by week, as we gather for worship Sunday by Sunday. There remains, even amongst us who are long in the tooth, a sense that as we gather with Christians for worship that we are stepping into a world that is other than the world we inhabit most of the time. Be that as we may where do we land today given the readings we just heard? Do we come down with Solomon's urgent and necessary prayer for wisdom to rule well or with Paul's teaching on Spirit-led prayer or with the parables as we hear Jesus teach today about the Kingdom of Heaven.

Good advice should one choose to preach on today's Gospel is to try and focus on a few of the parables rather than seeking to say something about each one of them. Remember in these parables Jesus is teaching about what the Kingdom of heaven, of what the kingdom of God is like. They serve a specific purpose.

If we look at the first parable the one about the mustard seed that grows into a large shrub that Jesus compares to a tree in which the birds of the air make their nests how does this open to us what the kingdom of God is like? The kingdom of God always begins imperceptibly. Where? In each one us. That is important. It doesn't begin with an idea. It begins with and in people who have faces, names, personalities, histories. The kingdom of God grows and grows. It grows imperceptibly till one day a friend, a

family member, a colleague comments on a noticeable difference in our attitude or the values we treasure or we notice a change in yourself. A stark example is when people stop swearing using the name of Jesus Christ. A name that should be held in reverence. A name we should hold with reverence. I starting watching *The Diplomat* with Keri Russell having enjoyed *The Americans*, but was deeply offended by the unnecessary cursing by the name that brings healing. *The Diplomat* has to my mind a weak storyline, so I shan't commend it.

The kingdom of God is growing... And today, as in each generation, people are making their nests, their homes in this tree. Often it must be said at great cost to themselves in China or in India or in Nigeria to name a few and more and more in the 'enlightened' West. A kingdom has a king and Christians believe that this king is Jesus, who is sovereign over all through the love that gives itself for the life of a friend. This tree is a place of safety. It is place of reassurance. It is a place where we are protected from the heat. It is a place in which through God's grace we build our home. All these metaphors flow out of this parable telling us what the Kingdom of God is like.

The Kingdom of God, in Matthew's gospel heaven, begins imperceptibly, but in the end, it is drawing all to itself... all of their own free will, of their own volition to make their home in God and in God's kingdom. God's kingdom is like a great tree with many thousands upon thousands of branches that no one can number, where people come and build their nests. And we know this to be true at Christ Church. Only this week a visitor to our church told me how his wife had turned to him and commented on the diversity of our church favourably and was suitably as a Christian simply thankful. We know that there is still much to do, so that we truly come to make what we see God doing into a fully lived reality.

The second parable is probably one of my favourites because of the use of the metaphor of leaven/yeast in German Hefe. We see a woman at work in her kitchen mixing the yeast in with the flour. Mixing a little portion of yeast with the flour until all the flour is permeated (durchdrungen) by the yeast. Remember these parables are given to tell us something about the Kingdom of God as it permeates every nook and cranny of our being. Nothing is safe from its reach as it begins to permeate our speech, how we order our lives, how we come to appreciate more the gift faith and the knowledge we acquire through it. Again you can't see it, but it is there. It is imperceptible, but it continues until all is leavened, as we give ourselves to the pursuit of godly wisdom and the leading of the Spirit in prayer. Solomon knew his need of godly wisdom.

I suspect all of us have had moments where our faith has taken us up short and even challenged us to change, as within each of us with a living and lively faith vies with our beliefs that we have reason to review continuously. I know this to be true. Whether you have made the necessary adjustments you will need to decide for yourself guided by God's wisdom through Spirit-led prayer. You may well need to revisit the place of coming up short, of being challenged. You may want to explore this with someone whom you regard to be mature in the Christian faith. What we hold dear begins with God and is to be rooted in God as made known in Jesus Christ. Reviewing our faith can indeed be painful, but it does not mean losing our hold on our Lord, or his losing his hold on us.

I came across some lyrics by John Lennon the prophet of the me, of the I that underline the point I am making. Up to a point the lyrics are clever, but they end in a place where the self or here the self in relationship with another exalts itself and takes the place of God. The song entitled *God* begins with a number of "I don't believe ins". And it continues with an implied critique of those who having forsaken Christianity find their wisdom in Eastern religions or practices. The comfort you find there is an illusion

Lennon will sing. The juxtaposition of Hitler and Jesus is jarring. Hear for yourselves what John wrote, believed and sang.

I don't believe in magic
I don't believe in I-Ching
I don't believe in Bible
I don't believe in tarot
I don't believe in Hitler
I don't believe in Jesus
I don't believe in Kennedy
I don't believe in Buddha
I don't believe in mantra
I don't believe in Gita
I don't believe in yoga
I don't believe in kings
I don't believe in Elvis
I don't believe in Zimmerman
I don't believe in Beatles
I just believe in me
Yoko and me
And that's reality

Zimmermann is Bob Dylan. I-Ching is a Chinese book on divination. Through these Lennon spells out clearly where his "I don't believe" leads us. It leads inexorably to isolation and believing in ourselves alone ourselves as the measure of all things. What is also clever is that the lyrics make it clear that those who jettison Jesus and the Bible are being lumped together with the music stars or bands many idolise or having forsaken Christianity feel themselves now superior, having made their nests in another religion or practice. Lennon is saying, you are no better than those who believe that Jesus is God made flesh. The only truth is me. Okay, Yoka and me, if you must. These lyrics are both clever and perceptive. Well, you won't be surprised that John's conclusion readily embraced by many, knowingly and for the most part unknowingly is not where I land "I just believe in me Yoko and me."

The above leads us to the most uncomfortable of today's parables, The Parable of the Dragnet, having avoided one already as the lectionary misses out some verses those

of the Parable of Weeds. The Parable of the Dragnet tells of a net that is thrown into the sea and dragged through the sea onto shore, where the fish are sorted. Anyone who has seen fishermen/women at work will know that they sort their catches. Often they do so already at sea, where some fish are thrown back into the sea. Fish that are too small, uneatable or unprofitable. It is a way of life. This picture is used to make plain that God will judge and God will judge at the end of time. Remember that this parable too is about what the kingdom of God is like. Those who are fit and those who are unfit for the kingdom live alongside each other this side of eternity. An eternity which is in God. Our actions do matter. They do matter and they matter absolutely. Luke makes this point on two different occasions writing in one passage, "For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light." (Luke 8:17) All will be exposed. You can hide this side of eternity. You can hide from yourself. You can hide from your need of God, but ultimately all will be exposed, therefore we are always being called to live towards eternity in God now.

A place of honesty for those who commit themselves to this way of life to live towards eternity in Christ is or will become week by week the confession of our sins for which we should prepare ourselves well beforehand if it is to be anything more than perfunctory meaning an action carried out without real interest, feeling, or effort. Confession needs preparation and a great deal of honesty that is only given to some. Reverence for human life made in the image of God, reverence for God's Word, and reverence for God's only begotten Son will be ours anew or for the first time, as we learn to take sin seriously and always first of all our sin. Reverence that God gives himself through this celebration of Holy Communion will increase and wonder will be ours again, so that we may say to God alone be the glory, whose Kingdom will have no end, for to revert to the parabolic image, it is in his tree that we through Christ make our nest and it is he through his grace working in us that we are leavened by the love of God in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**