

SUNDAY 30 JULY 2023 – Trinity 8

Genesis 29.15-28

Romans 8.26-39

Matthew 13.31-33, 44-52

We are into parables at the moment, aren't we ? In this part of Matthew's Gospel we are given one after the other, and in today's Gospel reading we hear five all at once. I don't know about you, but I have often wondered why Jesus speaks to people in this way. Why doesn't he just spell out the message in simple straightforward terms ? After all, it is the kingdom of heaven he is talking about; you might think he would want to make that topic crystal clear, so that everyone can grasp what Psalm 78 describes as having been hidden from the foundation of the world. The Psalmist prophesies that the Messiah will use parables to reveal the character of the kingdom of heaven.

The answer to the question lies in verse 52. Jesus by this time is talking only to the disciples, not to the crowds generally. After asking his followers whether they have understood all he has said, to which they reply yes, he goes on to describe them as "scribes who have been trained for the kingdom of heaven", which is why they are able to understand the parables – although you wonder if they really have, just as we struggle to understand them today. Earlier in Matthew 13 Jesus tells the disciples that the parables reveal and hide at the same time, because their effect depends on the moral status of the hearer. Things that should not be revealed to the unbeliever are not revealed. Only those who do the will of the Father in heaven and so belong to the family of Jesus will understand his parables. Those who do not do the will of God will not understand, because their ears are closed. The teaching of Jesus falls upon closed as well as open ears. What I wonder would have been my or your response if

we had been alive at that time ? Thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit we are able to answer that question for our lives today.

Remember King Solomon: his response to God's goodness to him and his family is unequivocal and humble: he asks for wisdom to rule his people which is granted to him, together with much more. So the seed which was planted in him early on in his reign is brought to fabulous fruition.

Which brings me to the parable of the mustard seed. Have you heard of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Mustard Seed Appeal ? It was set up a few years ago to transform the lives of those who are struggling with money and debt. Their situation had been highlighted by the existence of so-called loan sharks, who charged outrageous rates of interest which merely impoverished their customers even more. The Church Urban Fund established the Just Finance Foundation to work for a fairer financial system, to help people in financial crisis, and create a new generation who can manage money wisely and therefore lead more fruitful lives. It is possible to donate to the Mustard Seed Appeal: just google Mustard Seed but remember to add the word Appeal, otherwise you will be directed to the Mustard Seed Restaurant in Inverness.

As Jesus says, the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree. Recently I was talking to someone who has two teenage girls. At some stage in their schooling she realised that they were not flourishing as she thought they should; they were being driven by tests and targets, and were complaining to their mother that they never had time to finish anything. Well aware of the risk she was taking she de-registered her girls from the state education system for four years and embarked on a programme of home schooling, for which she had prepared herself over the previous year. What she wanted to achieve was to plant in her daughters a seed of a heightened awareness of nature, of how the world works, of how to interact with other human beings, of how to deal with emotions both in themselves and in others, and a host of other things. The girls were not

isolated, but were able to mix with other families who had made a similar decision. After four years this mother felt she had done all she could and returned her daughters to school. She was astonished to be congratulated by the school on the good job she had done in giving them a really rounded education, which served them well as they went forward in their lives. The seed had become a tree.

The seed of the kingdom of heaven is like that in our life of faith: if our ears and hearts are open to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us, we will be able to respond both in terms of wanting to know more about how God's loving attention to his world has not only never faltered, but has reached its climax in the sending of his son Jesus Christ; and we will also be able to respond to the Spirit in terms of working out our role in the world towards our neighbours wherever they may be, and our role may be small or large. This is important because we are all made in God's image, so that we owe it to him to be in a loving relationship with both him and our neighbour. It is in this dual activity and relationship that all of us who trust in him will eventually find that treasure, that pearl of great value to which everything else can be subordinated – the kingdom of heaven, which is not “up there” but firmly down in the here and now of our everyday existence. May our lives be blessed as we go about that task, and if we do not feel equal to it let's remember Paul's words in the Epistle from Romans 8 which is appointed for today: “the Spirit helps us in our weakness.....and intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words”.

PBW – 26.7.2023