

Christ Church, Ipswich

Sunday 12th July 2020

Sunday Worship

With Revd Neil Coulson

Hello, I hope all is well with you. This week, our focus will be on Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23. In this Gospel reading, Jesus tells the large crowd a parable about seed being sown onto different sorts of ground. Later on, he explains this parable to his disciples as an illustration of how different people respond to hearing the word of the Kingdom. Firstly, we begin our time of worship with the lectionary reading from the Psalms, Psalm 65:9-13. Let us worship God together.

Psalm 65:9-13

⁹ You visit the earth and water it,
 you greatly enrich it;
 the river of God is full of water;
 you provide the people with grain,
 for so you have prepared it.
¹⁰ You water its furrows abundantly,
 settling its ridges,
 softening it with showers,
 and blessing its growth.
¹¹ You crown the year with your bounty;
 your wagon tracks overflow with richness.
¹² The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
 the hills gird themselves with joy,
¹³ the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
 the valleys deck themselves with grain,
 they shout and sing together for joy.

A prayer of approach

God of grace and love,
 We rely on your love
 extended to us in all ways and at all times,
 extravagantly and with generosity.

We live day by day
 knowing that your care and concern is poured out for us
 in your provision for our needs
 and beyond our imagining.

You entrust us with the gift of the good news of the Gospel
 and invite us to be partners in the sharing of the message of grace.

Day by day we realise the many gifts lavished upon us.
 We come to you to acknowledge and praise you
 for all your goodness to us. **Amen**

Hymn: For the fruits of his creation

For the fruits of his creation,
 thanks be to God;
 for his gifts to every nation,
 thanks be to God;
 for the ploughing, sowing, reaping,
 silent growth while we are sleeping,
 future needs in earth's safe keeping,
 thanks be to God.

In the just reward of labour,
 God's will is done;
 in the help we give our neighbour,
 God's will is done;
 in our world-wide task of caring
 for the hungry and despairing,
 in the harvest we are sharing,
 God's will is done.

For the harvest of his Spirit,
 thanks be to God;
 for the good we all inherit,
 thanks be to God;
 for the wonders that astound us,
 for the truths that still confound us,
 most of all, that love has found us,
 thanks be to God.

F. Pratt Green

A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

O God of grace and glory,
 We give you thanks for the rhythm of the seasons
 and the constant provision for our needs in life.
 We are grateful for the commitment of those who look after our quality of life,
 through food production, health care and civic security.

We are aware of the injustices and ill division of wealth in our world,
 and are mindful of the message of those who challenge our lifestyle
 and comfortable way of living.

We are deeply thankful for the mercy and love you have shown to us all,
 day by day, in countless ways.

May we treasure your word and its message
 and be more and more aware of our responsibility as disciples
 in gratitude to you for Jesus our Lord. **Amen**

A prayer as we prepare to read the Scripture and consider its message to us

Lord, we might not be sitting by a lake today.
 However, as the crowds eagerly gathered
 to listen to the stories and truths you told them,
 we too await your word to us.
 With joy in our hearts, and anticipation,
 we pray that you will give us listening ears,
 and hearts open to receive your love,
 your teaching, and your wisdom.
 Help our lives to be full to bursting, bearing your fruit. **Amen.**

Bible Reading: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The Parable of the Sower

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears^[a] listen!"

The Parable of the Sower Explained

¹⁸"Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.^[a] ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Reflection

We now move into Matthew 13. Here we find the third of Jesus's five major speeches within this Gospel. Matthew has not used the word 'parable' so far, though Jesus has certainly spoken in ways that seem parabolic on occasions. However, Matthew now tells us explicitly that Jesus spoke in parables and he records seven examples. All seven are about the key subject of Jesus' preaching in Matthew: the Kingdom of heaven. In Matthew 13 we find that Jesus alternates between speaking to the crowds and then to his disciples. Furthermore, we note that Mathew has this teaching being given on the very same day that the Pharisees begin their plot to kill him (12:14) and immediately before the report of John the Baptist's murder (14:1-12). This is the context for this teaching - with conflict and danger on either side of him, Jesus sits by the sea and speaks about the mysteries of the Kingdom of heaven.

In 'The Parable of the Sower', Jesus begins with an apparently simple story of seed falling on different types of soil. We notice that most of the seed is wasted: Some of it is eaten by birds before it ever takes root; other seed does begin to grow but the plants are then choked out by thorns or scorched by the sun. Even so, the small amount of seed that does fall onto good soil produces a harvest that more than compensates for the seed that did not. As such, this story is actually quite a normal description of agricultural experience, though this sower seems to be remarkably indiscriminate and yet the sower still enjoys incredibly good results. Matthew's Jesus is talking about what happens with 'the word of the Kingdom' (13:19) which does indeed go out to all indiscriminately and which does sometimes yield spectacular, even miraculous results.

Later on, we find Jesus explaining this parable to his disciples. It is an allegory concerning the spread of the word of the Kingdom – now, the gospel message of Jesus (4:17, 23) and his disciples (10:7) is given to Israel but as we will soon discover, this message will eventually go out to the whole world (24:14). The four types of soil illuminate how different people may respond to this word. Some will simply reject it. Jesus has just described these people in 13:14-15 as those whose hearts are closed to God’s word. Others will respond positively, even joyfully but will eventually fall away either because they cannot bear the stress of persecution or because they tried to serve the two masters of ‘God and wealth’ and they get tied up with worldly pursuits (6:19-24). But there is hope and we see that not every seed needs to produce fruit. God is in charge of the harvest and he has taken all these factors into account. In fact, as has been true throughout the history of Israel, only a remnant is needed and the fruit they bear will be so miraculous that it perfectly points to the glorious Kingdom of heaven.

As used here, the metaphor of ‘bearing fruit’ has qualitative and quantitative meanings: it firstly means to demonstrate repentance through ethically righteous behaviour. We notice that once again, just as with the highly significant Sermon on the Mount (the first of the five major speeches in Matthew 5-7), Jesus has much to say about right behaviour and very little to say about right beliefs – I think this is always a point worth reflecting upon. And secondly, ‘bearing fruits’ here also means to multiply, to increase the community by fulfilling Jesus’s initial and final words to his disciples: ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people’ (4:19) and ‘Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations’ (28:19). Those who ‘bear fruit’ in these ways are those who ‘hear the word and understand it’ and Jesus has already indicated that such understanding is a gift from God (11:25, 13:11). So, by our openness to God, may we be those who gladly receive this gift and may we always seek to live and love as those who have encountered the extravagant and indiscriminate grace and goodness of God. Amen

Let us continue to reflect on today’s reading as we read this short meditation:

How awful!
 How obscenely extravagant!
 How indiscriminate of God
 to throw open the gates of the kingdom
 so that anyone might find a way in.
 No standards.
 No safeguards.
 But a generosity that is sure to be abused
 and just as scandalous today
 as was this message
 to those who listened to Jesus.
 Still there are those
 who do not want to believe,
 who want to rewrite
 the story of God’s unconditional welcome,
 who want to maintain standards
 and conditions
 and limit the sphere
 of the impossible kingdom of God.
 Thankfully, the God of the Universe
 knows no bounds
 and cannot be subdued
 but carries on regardless,
 sowing and reaping,
 shuffling and shoogling,
 making space for all,
 throwing wide the doors
 and gathering us in.

Our prayers of intercession

God of all seeds and all stories,
we pray for the wisdom to apply the truth of Jesus' parables
to our own lives

and to our life together in this place where we worship you
and this community where we serve you.

May we see you, may we hear you, may we know you care.

In the world, we pray especially
for places where climate change has brought drought...
for the places where it has brought floods ...
for those whose crops have been scorched...
for those whose livelihoods have been washed away.

We pray for the people of Japan –
for those caught in the heavy rains there –
and for the people of Australia
and their wildlife endangered by the forest fires.

We pray too for those in our own country
who face continual upheaval and heartache through repeated flooding.

May we see you, may we hear you, may we know you care.

We pray for those whose life's seeds
are being choked by anxiety, poverty and hardship...
for those who have lost their jobs...
for those unable to feed their families
or to pay their mortgages and rent...
for those living without basic facilities.

We pray for those given hope by the emergency budget
and for those who feel hope-less
and for foodbanks and charities that try to help all who are struggling.

May we see you, may we hear you, may we know you care.

We pray for those unable to thrive because of illness...
and those denied the opportunity
to plant the seeds of their dreams in fertile soil...
for those hospitalised with Covid-19 or other conditions ...
for those whose journey to recovery is long , slow and painful...
for those who nurse them...
for those who love them...
for those whose treatment has been put on hold...

We pray for those robbed of the opportunity to go to school,
for children in war zones, those in refugee camps,
those who have to work to find their daily food.

May we see you, may we hear you, may we know you care.

And we pray for those whose seeds are watered by their tears...
those grieving the loss of someone close to them...
those who feel forgotten...
those who are neglected...

those who are victims of injustice, abuse, or cruelty...

**May they – and all in any kind of need today – see you,
may they hear you, and may they know you care.**

We pray for those we love who are in need of your comfort, help and healing at this time:
 We pray for Margaret Widdowson who is unwell in hospital and is now receiving treatment. May she know your healing presence and may all the family sense your love and peace at this difficult time.
 We remember and give thanks for the life of Sybil Nicholls and we pray for her son and all her family at this time of loss. May they know your comfort and love.
 We keep Jo and her family in our thoughts and prayers as Jo continues her recovery following surgery. May they all sense your presence and peace.
 We pray for Joan Cross as she faces challenges with her health. May she know your strength and healing at this time.

A moment of quiet for your own prayers for our broken world and those in need.

**May they – and all in any kind of need today – see you,
 may they hear you, and may they know you care. Amen**

We pray **The Lords' Prayer** together, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

A sending out prayer

Lord God, the world outside awaits us
 with all its troubles and uncertainties
 – but also with its opportunities.
 Send us out now, in your name,
 to look consciously for ways
 of seeing you in the world around,
 and to act accordingly. **Amen.**

The Blessing

May the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
 be upon us all, and those we love, today and always, **Amen.**

The Grace

**May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
 the love of God
 and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
 be with us all,
 for evermore.
 Amen.**

May God bless you all richly,
 With our love and best wishes to you and your families,

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