

6th Sunday after Pentecost

24th July 2011

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Gen 29: 15–28; Rom 8: 26–39; Matt 13: 44–58

In the Gospel, we hear Jesus the great teacher of parables, giving us stories and images of stunning simplicity to ponder on. 'A merchant went out and found one pearl of such great value, he sold everything he owned, and bought it.' Jesus says that's what God's kingdom is like. What does that say to you? For what one thing would you give everything you have? Choose carefully!

In the 19th century Kierkegaard wrote a book called 'Purity of Heart is to will one thing', a kind of commentary on this parable, asking us to focus our mind and our desire (among so many options that we have) on this one thing worth all the rest. Jesus calls this one thing 'the mystery of the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 13: 11). It is surely the wisdom that the people of his home town, Nazareth, saw and heard in him (and were offended).

Another time, he said: 'I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim things hidden since the foundation of the world' (Matt 13: 35). That's what parables do. They sink a shaft deep into the mystery of God, and invite us to choose what we find there.

Now, I want to leave Jesus there for the moment, and turn to St Paul – our patron saint – who also gives us wonderful images of what it means to live before God. He doesn't call them parables, but that's what they are. I want to walk through a sequence of parables we've heard from his Letter to the Romans over these last four weeks, beginning in the middle of chapter 7 and ending today with the magnificent end of chapter 8. It's a sequence which begins in defeat and ends in victory. I wonder: where do we see ourselves along that arc?

The **first parable**, then, is in Romans 7: 14–25, a famous passage about the difficulty of doing what is right. Here is part of it:

'We know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate....

I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do ... ' (7: 14-15; 18-19)

... and so on. It's an extraordinary picture of someone trapped in an endless cycle of defeat and self-recrimination, round and round and round like a mouse in a wheel. The 'I' in this passage is not Paul himself: he's not giving us a slice of his autobiography, though the strength of the feeling shows he knew what it is to struggle like this, between a rock and a hard place. But the 'I' is all or any of us, because we are all sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, so we know what it is to be tempted, caught between what we want and what we know we should want. We all know what it's like feeling feeble and unable to cope with powerful impulses that assail us. It's a struggle that traps us in ourselves. Notice how often the words 'I', 'me' and 'my' are repeated in the verses I read; in fact they occur 38 times in this passage of only 12 verses. Here is a trapped soul longing for some relief.

But if the passage is painful to read and we wonder, 'Is life really like this? Is it so bad?', we need to wait for the punchline: 'Who will rescue me from this body of death? - thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord! [vv. 24-5]' We need to know that there is a solution. Whatever is trapping us, God has given us Christ to bring us forgiveness - healing - peace - new life. And the kingdom of God is like that.

The **second parable** begins immediately from that point of assurance.

'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,

for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death' [8: 1-2].

So now, in this picture, we have been set free, and we have a choice. We're still flesh and blood, aware of our weakness, but we also know we are more than that, 'spirit' as Paul says. As flesh and blood we have to eat and sleep, but do we let those concerns of the body and the ego dominate our lives? When Paul talks about 'flesh', he is not talking about the fact of being fleshly, needing food, drink, sleep, sex; he means the selfish striving that these may lead us into: greed, anger and the rest. As spiritual beings we know also about love, peace, kindness, hope, and these we can choose instead. He says, 'To set the mind on the flesh is death; to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace' [v. 6]: which do we choose?

But Paul does not leave us on that knife-edge of choice, because he says we who by nature are children of Adam and Eve are now sons and daughters of God. We have been adopted by God, and the Spirit of life in God is stronger than the forces of self and sin that pull us backwards. And so we can live in freedom, and in the delight that God longs to give us – if we choose. And the kingdom of God is like this.

So that's the second parable – the possibility of us living as sons and daughters of God. And then for the **third parable** Paul suddenly opens up the scene – perhaps so that we don't think this is all just about us, and our little doubts and hopes. He says: Imagine the whole of creation, the entire universe, is like a woman in labour, struggling painfully to give birth to a new creation. Wherever there are problems in the world, or pain, that's what's going on: God is struggling to bring to birth God's new creation. Do we see that? Do we see that in new nations celebrating their freedom amid violent opposition? – researchers labouring to find cures for disease? – relief agencies rushing to bring relief to people gripped by famine? But this is what's going on, Paul says, and this is what we are caught up in, because God wants the whole of creation to have 'the glorious liberty of the children of God' [v. 21]. It turns out that the Christian life is not about us, trying to act less selfishly or save our souls; we're being invited to be the first-fruits of God's new creation [v. 23]. And the kingdom of God is like that. Does that help us decide which way to jump?

And then the focus drops down again into the human heart, and Paul says (his **fourth parable**): The kingdom of God is as if you are trying to pray and you discover you are not alone in this – you are being prayed through by God. We heard it in today's reading:

'The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought [back into struggle again!] but that very Spirit interceded for us with sighs too deep for words [v. 26].'

Perhaps we think prayer is about finding words or intentions good enough to offer to God, and we try and fail, or never attempt it. The problem isn't just that we can't find the right words, half the time we don't know what we really want, poor muddled creatures that we are.

In all these parables, human beings are afflicted with the illusion that they have to fix things, sort out their lives, when really God is doing the work and we just have to jump on God's bandwagon, go with God's flow, share in God's work of healing, freedom, new creation. A few weeks ago on the Quiet Day I shared the concept of 'ullage'. What is ullage? It's the empty space at the top of a bottle, or a tin. Sometimes we feel cheated, when we open a crisp packet and see how little we get for our money, but sometimes that space is needed. There needs to be some air in a wine bottle to allow for expansion.

Paul is talking about the necessity of spiritual ullage. We need to leave some space in our lives to be filled by God's Spirit, not fill our lives up with certainties and purposes or striving. It's only when we leave some ullage, some space for the Spirit, that we can let ourselves be prayed through by the Spirit of God, let God's desire for the peace and freedom of the world come alive in our hearts and carry us through into action. Then indeed, as Paul says, 'All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose' [v.28] – as we let God reshape us (sons and daughters) until we come to resemble his true and firstborn son Jesus.

Do we find ourselves in this parable? Does it show us why our experience of prayer has often seemed petty and unproductive – the prayers we were trying to manage – when God's Spirit is longing to draw us onwards to greatness? And the kingdom of God is like that.

And then the **fifth and final parable** is suddenly a law-court, in which we think we're up before the bench accused of some terrible crime. But before we start making up our excuses we need to know there is no charge, the case has been dismissed, if there's any fine to pay it's been paid already. Translations often confuse this passage (including the one we heard) but what we have in verses 33–34 is a string of questions with the answer 'No one' or 'No'.

'Who will bring any charge against God's chosen ones? – Is it God, the one who declares us guiltless? [No!]

So who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, the one who died and was raised and intercedes for us at God's right hand?' [obviously not].

Did we think the world was like a law-court, and God is like a Judge? or like the Traffic Police, counting up penalty points against us and sending out green notices with incriminating photos to prove our guilt? Is this how we see God? Wrong, says Paul. There is no judge and no jury. We've actually been summonsed to a party! – a celebration of the love of Christ who brings us through every struggle and every trial and teaches us the depth and the boundlessness of God's love. That's what God, and God's kingdom, are like.

So Paul, like Jesus, proclaims in parables deep truths about our lives, 'things hidden since the foundation of the world'. His parables of grace have traversed a long arc, from guilt and struggle, through hesitantly choosing God, through coming to see the big picture of God's purposes, through making space for God in our lives, letting God open up in us our new nature as sons and daughters, able to stand upright before God.

Wherever you find yourself along that arc, be assured the grace of God is the same at every stage, the grace revealed in Christ. And it all points forward to that extraordinary ending, when Paul declares, beyond all parables [vv. 38–9]:

‘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 in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

Thanks be to God.