



## **Eighth Sunday after Pentecost Sunday, July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

### **The 'Absurd' Kingdom**



One of the real challenges of Christianity is its subtlety, its counter-intuitiveness; something lost on many Christians as well as those who are less well disposed to the Gospel. Subtlety, nuance, is always difficult to understand and embrace, not least in contemporary times, where truth is deemed to derive from empiricism, observation of the facts, facts that are there for all to see. The scientific or empirical method as it is called, is important to modernity and has taken us a long way in the field of research, changing our lives for the better. That said, truth is a broad thing, and discovering it must include all our senses and imagination, observation of what is, as well as the capacity to see beyond, with both mind and heart. To discern truth then, involves the capacity for speculation.

Today, we complete the rhythm of readings in chapter 13 of Matthew's Gospel, readings set down in the Revised Common Lectionary. The chapter is pivotal to Matthew, as he speaks through analogy, about the kingdom of God, or as he calls it, the "kingdom of heaven". For the Gospels in general, this idea of the kingdom is pivotal, reflecting what Jesus himself proclaims, and gives expression to his denunciation of the oppressive social, economic and cultic structures of Jewish society.

Over the past two weeks, we have thought about the two dominant parables of the chapter: The Sower and the Wheat and Weeds. Today we run into a whole series of shorter analogies: the kingdom as a mustard seed, as yeast, as a merchant who seeks out the finest pearl, and as a net, thrown into the sea that catches loads of fish. Each of these analogies is different, but collectively they all grasp the idea of absurd subtlety: the ordinariness of the mustard bush, the minuteness of the amount of yeast, the tininess of the pearl, and the relativity of a net in a gigantic ocean. I think that the absurd subtlety of the kingdom, the subtlety with which God operates in the world, is something that requires both the mind and the heart, requires a humility, to which we moderns are not well suited; confident as we are about ourselves. Let's explore this together!

## Announcements

**Hymn: I danced in the morning (TiS 242, Lord of the Dance, American Shaker Tune, Sydney Carter)**

### Welcome

In the name of God,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

The Lord be with you  
**And with you**

### Opening Prayers

While I want to explore the idea of the subtlety of the Kingdom and more broadly the subtlety of God's interaction with people, there is another dimension to the Gospel reading today, reflected especially in the idea of the kingdom as a pearl, "of great price": that is, its inherent and dramatic value. The kingdom is something that we dare not ignore as *the* blueprint for living. This is the idea in the following meditation.

No time for spreadsheets,  
for the accountant's calculations.

***No time for checking the agenda,  
the meetings scheduled.***

No time for the radio station's  
business headlines,

***for Googling the financial news.***

Let the other hunters continue  
to dig on their various islands –  
places you have tried before,  
long through the soul-less days,  
the heartless nights –

today you have discovered  
the riches you've been waiting for,  
searching for,

***you and the world waiting and searching,  
your whole life.***

No time for the rear-view mirror.

***No time for the GPS to suggest  
alternate routes that might  
contain less risk or cost.***

This is highest value; this is greatest treasure;  
 the pearl the world in its wisdom  
 has been diving for, coming up empty handed.  
 This is worth staking your day,  
 your path,  
 your life upon.

This is life itself.

It is the kingdom of heaven.

It is Christ, and the way  
 he teaches and gives.

It is the love of God for you  
 and for the aching, breaking,  
 yearning world.

***No time left for waiting.***

***Come and buy the entire field.***

**Peace**

**SMG**

## **LET'S HEAR THE WORD**

### **Some Anecdotal Observations about the 'Absurdity' of Christian Belief**

My dear wife has, I would say, probably never opened a religious book, and seems to be one of those people to whom the whole idea is utterly remote and absurd. **Christopher Hitchens**

One cannot really be Catholic and grown up. **George Orwell**

Forgive O Lord, my little jokes on Thee  
 And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me. **Robert Frost**

Religions are all alike – founded on fables and mythology.  
**Thomas Jefferson**

In Christianity, neither morality nor religion come into contact with reality at any point. **Friederich Nietzsche**

## **Genesis 29:15-30 (The Message): Self-Interest, Lies and God**

Marian Kingham

This reading is disturbing, as was the reading two weeks ago when Jacob steals Esau's birth-right, which God (Yahweh) accepts so as to ensure that the family line passes through Jacob. In that story, it was by no means clear, why God prefers Esau and it left a question over God's own motives. Today, we are similarly disturbed by the absurdity of a situation where Jacob, true to form, conspires to 'close the deal' on Rachel, with her father Laban. There are two problems here, reading from a 21<sup>st</sup> century western perspective: first, the way in which Leah and Rachel are seen as no more than commodities. Both Jacob, who is clearly 'in lust' with Rachel, seeks to 'bed her' and Laban, the father cheats Jacob, by replacing Rachel with Leah, for his own economic benefit. The second problem for us, is that God, while not directly involved in the lies and abuse, somehow is complicit, because this rather unpleasant, narcissistic Jacob, continues to be the beneficiary of his blessings. This is how Genesis depicts God, this is how God is present with his people in the Book of Genesis. The best we can say here, although it is not satisfactory, is that God apparently works with even the scurrilous. In fact, if he didn't, there would be relatively few candidates eligible for the jobs.

**14-15** Laban said, "You're family! My flesh and blood!"

When Jacob had been with him for a month, Laban said, "Just because you're my nephew, you shouldn't work for me for nothing. Tell me what you want to be paid. What's a fair wage?"

**16-18** Now Laban had two daughters; Leah was the older and Rachel the younger. Leah had nice eyes, but Rachel was stunningly beautiful. And it was Rachel that Jacob loved.

So Jacob answered, "I will work for you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."

**19** "It is far better," said Laban, "that I give her to you than marry her to some outsider. Yes. Stay here with me."

**20** So Jacob worked seven years for Rachel. But it only seemed like a few days, he loved her so much.

**21-24** Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife; I've completed what we agreed I'd do. I'm ready to consummate my marriage." Laban invited everyone around and threw a big feast. At evening, though, he got his daughter Leah and brought her to the marriage bed, and Jacob slept with her. (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah as her maid.)

**25** Morning came: There was Leah in the marriage bed!

Jacob confronted Laban, “What have you done to me? Didn’t I work all this time for the hand of Rachel? Why did you cheat me?”

<sup>26-27</sup> “We don’t do it that way in our country,” said Laban. “We don’t marry off the younger daughter before the older. Enjoy your week of honeymoon, and then we’ll give you the other one also. But it will cost you another seven years of work.”

<sup>28-30</sup> Jacob agreed. When he’d completed the honeymoon week, Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. (Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maid.) Jacob then slept with her. And he loved Rachel more than Leah. He worked for Laban another seven years.

The word of the Lord

***Thanks be to God***

## **Psalm 105: 1-11: A Psalm Recounting Israel’s History (Good News Translation)**

Marian Kingham

Psalm 105 is one of a handful of psalms which recount part of the history of Israel (see also Pss 78, 106, 135, 136). It is also one of the psalms that ends with the word hallelujah, ‘praise the Lord’ (cf. Ps 106 etc.). After a general introduction calling people to give thanks to the Lord (vv. 1-4) they are then called on to ‘remember’ (v. 5). This is one of the major themes of the psalm. Memory and remembrance are the key to this recounting of Israel’s early history. But it is memory with a purpose, and the memory that the psalmist recounts is tailored to that purpose.

The central themes of Psalm 105 are set out in vv. 7-11. They have to do with the faithfulness of God. The Lord is described as sovereign over all the earth (v. 7). The everlasting nature of the covenant the Lord made with Abraham is stressed (vv. 8-10), and the gift of the land of Canaan as Israel’s ‘portion for an inheritance’ is the focus in v. 11. Frequent repetition of significant words throughout the psalm such as ‘land(s)’ (10 times), ‘covenant’ and its synonyms (e.g. ‘word’, ‘promise’) (8 times) and of the names of the patriarchs (8 times), underlines these themes.

This recital of ancient events offers hope for them. Their faithful God will provide. But at the same time there is an openness at the end of the psalm. The purpose of the gift of land is so that his people might keep the Lord’s statutes (vs. 44-45).

**105** Give thanks to the LORD,  
proclaim his greatness;  
tell the nations what he has done.

<sup>2</sup> ***Sing praise to the LORD;***  
***tell the wonderful things he has done.***

<sup>3</sup> Be glad that we belong to him;

let all who worship him rejoice.

**<sup>4</sup> Go to the LORD for help;  
and worship him continually.**

<sup>5-6</sup> You descendants of Abraham, his servant;  
you descendants of Jacob, the man he chose:  
remember the miracles that God performed  
and the judgments that he gave.

**<sup>7</sup> The LORD is our God;  
his commands are for all the world.**

<sup>8</sup> He will keep his covenant forever,  
his promises for a thousand generations.

**<sup>9</sup> He will keep the agreement he made with Abraham  
and his promise to Isaac.**

<sup>10</sup> The LORD made a covenant with Jacob,  
one that will last forever.

**<sup>11</sup> "I will give you the land of Canaan," he said.  
"It will be your own possession."**

<sup>44</sup> He gave them the lands of other peoples  
and let them take over their fields,

**<sup>45</sup> so that his people would obey his laws  
and keep all his commands.**

**Praise the LORD!**

### **Romans 8:26-39: Paul's Emphasis Upon the Spirit of God who Accompanies Us in the Human Struggle (Good News Translation)**

Paul is in midstream as he looks to the future. He has just opened a vista of hope that looks to a transformed world both of people and of creation as a whole (8:18-25). In recent times the transformation and renewal of the whole creation takes on new dimensions of urgency as we face the impact of climate change and the way we manage our environment. Such issues claim central court in our reflections on spirituality and hope. Paul has already spoken of the Spirit (8:23). The Spirit yearns. It longs for change, for renewal, for birth of the new. Paul has not arrived. He is in the midst of the pain of change and hope. The Spirit helps us in our human frailty (8:26), not by offering shortcuts to success, but by praying with and for us. The Spirit, the life of God with and within us, is a longing and yearning Spirit. What a spirituality! We are caught up into the divine yearning for change far beyond what we can comprehend: we cannot capture it in words (8:26). Paul may have in mind ecstatic groaning, but this is far from a celebration of speaking in tongues. It is love's yearning which knows no bounds and cannot be captured in definition.

The Spirit not only groans with us; it groans for us (8:26). There is a groaning in the heart of God. We become part of it. That is something ultimately and fundamentally positive. It is hope, whatever befalls us (8:28).

<sup>26</sup> In the same way the Spirit also comes to help us, weak as we are. For we do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express. <sup>27</sup> And God, who sees into our hearts, knows what the thought of the Spirit is; because the Spirit pleads with God on behalf of his people and in accordance with his will.

<sup>28</sup> We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him,<sup>[a]</sup> those whom he has called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> Those whom God had already chosen he also set apart to become like his Son, so that the Son would be the first among many believers. <sup>30</sup> And so those whom God set apart, he called; and those he called, he put right with himself, and he shared his glory with them.

<sup>31</sup> In view of all this, what can we say? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> Certainly not God, who did not even keep back his own Son, but offered him for us all! He gave us his Son—will he not also freely give us all things? <sup>33</sup> Who will accuse God's chosen people? God himself declares them not guilty! <sup>34</sup> Who, then, will condemn them? Not Christ Jesus, who died, or rather, who was raised to life and is at the right side of God, pleading with him for us! <sup>35</sup> Who, then, can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble do it, or hardship or persecution or hunger or poverty or danger or death? <sup>36</sup> As the scripture says,

“For your sake we are in danger of death at all times;  
we are treated like sheep that are going to be slaughtered.”

<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we have complete victory through him who loved us! <sup>38</sup> For I am certain that nothing can separate us from his love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, <sup>39</sup> neither the world above nor the world below—there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord.

The word of the Lord  
***Thanks be to God***

## **Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52: God's 'Absurd Subtlety' (The Message)**

Gilda Dornan

This is the last section of Matthew Chapter 13, which we have read over the past two weeks. Set against the background of the *Parable of the Sower*, which underscored the idea of the kingdom's radical generosity and the *Wheat and Weeds*, where the kingdom invites generosity rather than rivalry in making judgments about who and what are good and evil in the world; today, we hear more stories about what the Kingdom is like. In sum, the common idea is the absurd subtlety of the kingdom, the subtlety with which God operates in the world, something that requires both the mind and the heart, to discern, analytical skill yes, but more, an imagination that sees beyond.

<sup>31-32</sup> Another story. "God's kingdom is like a pine nut that a farmer plants. It is quite small as seeds go, but in the course of years it grows into a huge pine tree, and eagles build nests in it."

<sup>33</sup> Another story. "God's kingdom is like yeast that a woman works into the dough for dozens of loaves of barley bread—and waits while the dough rises."

<sup>44</sup> "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

<sup>45</sup> "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. <sup>46</sup> When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

<sup>47</sup> "Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. <sup>48</sup> When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. <sup>49</sup> This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous <sup>50</sup> and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

<sup>51</sup> "Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked.

"Yes," they replied.

<sup>52</sup> He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

The Gospel of the Lord

***Praise to you Lord Christ***

**Hymn: God has spoken (TiS 636, Song of Good News,  
W.F. Jabusch)**

**A Film Clip from the movie, Martin Scorsese's "Silence" (2016)**

This is an extraordinary *tour de force*, about Christian faith and the unpredictable twists and turns of the Christian way. Set in Japan of the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the persecution of Christian converts was at its height, two Portuguese priests, Fr. Garupe and Fr. Rodrigues travel to locate their mentor, Fr. Ferreira, who has apparently denied the faith, apostatized, and become a Buddhist. We enter the drama at the point at which Fr. Rodriguez is being requested to apostatize himself in order to save the Japanese Christian converts, who will die if he does not. Formerly, damning of Ferreira, we see how Rodrigues responds, as he enters into the action of stepping on the image of Jesus (*fumi-e*). Is this an 'absurd' action of faith or a denial of faith?

**Some thoughts....**

**Let's Give: Our Offerings**

**Doxology**

***Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,  
praise him, all creatures here below,  
praise him above, ye heavenly host,  
praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.***

**Prayer of Dedication**

**Prayers of the People**

At the end of each prayer/petition, the leader will say, "Help us see beyond black and white" and we respond, "Help us to be willing to take risks for you". Lawrence Peak

**Closing Hymn: I the Lord (TiS, 658, Here I am Lord, D. Schutte)**

**Blessing and Sending Out**

The blessing of God almighty,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit  
Be upon you and remain with you always

Our service has ended.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord

***In the name of Christ***

**We sing twice: Shalom to you (TiS 778, Somos del Señor, Elise Shoemaker Eslinger)**

**Musical Postlude**

**Pianist:**

Travis Loughhead