

Sunday 26th July 2020

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, though separate let us worship together in God.

Hymn

Praise to the living God! Tune Leoni

All praise be to his name,
who was, and is, and is to be,
for aye the same!
The one eternal God
ere aught that now appears:
the First, the Last, beyond all thought
his timeless years!

Formless, all lovely forms
declare his loveliness;
holy, no holiness of earth
can his express.

Lo, he is Lord of all!
Creation speaks his praise,
and everywhere, above, below,
his will obeys.

His Spirit floweth free,
high surging where it will;
in prophet's word he spoke of old,
he speaketh still.

Established is his law,
and changeless it shall stand,
deep written on the human heart,
on sea, on land.

Eternal life hath he
implanted in the soul,
his love shall be our strength and stay,
while ages roll.

Praise to the living God!
all praise be to his name,
who was, and is, and is to be,
for aye the same!

from the Hebrew Yigdal, c. 13th cent.

Prayer

Eternal God ever present around and within creation, around and within each human, we praise you. We look with wonder at the miracle of life in all its facets, we marvel at the intricacy of creation with its seasons and its mysteries and we praise you. When we receive a phone call or a letter when we most need it, we praise you. When an unexpected invitation opens up fresh wonders or reminds us of forgotten wonders, we praise you and reflecting on this we thank you.

We thank you for each new day with all its opportunities, for family and friends to share life with, and for the luxury of a bed, food and clean clothes. For your gracious and unconditional love, and the example of Jesus who introduced you in a new way, we thank you. For our time together in your presence, even though for now we are apart, we thank you and join our voices in the prayer of Jesus saying,
The Lord's prayer

Readings Matthew 13:31-33 & 44-50
 Romans 8:26 -39 (CEV)

Reflective thoughts

I am sure that most of us have at some time been in a conversation about heaven. Maybe it was sparked by a song which featured something about heaven, maybe it was sparked by a death, or maybe someone just asked the question – 'do you believe in heaven? I suspect that for each one of us there is a definition and they are all slightly different, depending on your experience of life.

In the gospels there are many parables about the Kingdom, and for many that is shorthand for heaven, but is it? Matthew uses the term Kingdom of Heaven where Mark and Luke use the term Kingdom of God. The actual word Matthew uses is in a plural form and so technically it should read Kingdom of the heavens, which is not the same at all. Many believe that Matthew used this particular form because of his Jewish heritage which forbade the use of God's name. However, should we assume that these parables are about the afterlife? Indeed, is there an afterlife? There are many people today who doubt any afterlife and live this life as if it was all there is, although many often wonder if there should not be more to life.

Later we will look in more detail at the parables contained in our reading from Matthew but first I invite you to take some time to imagine your answer to the question what is heaven like? There has been much written about this, and even some films depicting what heaven might be like:

- Could it be a child's playground for all ages where you play on a magnificent soft play area, you cannot be hurt because it is heaven and there are fountains of squash and mounds of ice cream.
- Will it be the best example of all the best things you have ever experienced?
- Will it be all eternal peace and calm, with no raised voices, no arguments, no hurt, nothing?
- Will it be the place all your dreams come true?

How do you envisage heaven, how would you describe it?

The problem is that we all have a different perfect. One person's heaven could be someone else's nightmare, perpetual cricket for example. Adrian Plass tells a story of a group of friends having such a conversation during which someone suggests we might be allowed to do or have the one thing we have wanted most but never had. He had noticed throughout the conversation one chap sat with a quiet look of scepticism on his face but at this suggestion it changed to a look of deep spiritual longing. Gently he said the chap, 'a penny for them'. The chap comes to with a start and begins to answer, 'I was just thinking how much I've always wanted.... I was just thinking how absolutely wonderful it would be if I was given a lathe of my own'.

Is there something you have always wanted to have or do?

I have often been asked what I think heaven will be like, and the most truthful answer is I do not know, however, I am always willing to share my thoughts. For me one of the problems with conversations about the afterlife, and about much that is written in scripture and elsewhere is the assumption that it is an exclusive club, you have to have a certificate of best behaviour before you

are admitted. Now I believe that unconditional love allows for free will and that means we can make mistakes and they will not be held against us eternally. There are consequences in this life, but they will not change the afterlife for any one of us. Paul's letter to the Romans includes this notion in chapter, eight verses 37-39, 'In everything we have won more than a victory because of Christ who loves us. ³⁸ I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love—not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, ³⁹ and not powers above or powers below.

If death cannot separate us from God's love then I believe we are all going to die into God, whatever our actions and experiences have been on earth. Judgment in the Old Testament means being put right with God, all that we have put in the way of a relationship with God dissolves and we become truly one. It is a far cry from our human expectation of judgement with its Implicit understanding of retribution and penalty.

Hymn

Holy Spirit, hear us;
help us while we sing;
breathe into the music
of the praise we bring.

Tune Glenfinlas (Wise men seeking Jesus)

Holy Spirit, prompt us
when we try to pray;
nearer come, and teach us
what we ought to say.

Holy Spirit, give us
each a lively mind;
make us more like Jesus,
gracious, pure, and kind.

Holy Spirit, teach us
through the words we read;
bring to life the Bible
with the light we need.

Holy Spirit, help us
daily, by your might,
what is wrong to conquer,
and to choose the right.

William Henry Parker (1845-1929) (*alt.*)

Reflection

Nicholas Allan in his children's book 'Heaven' tells the story of Lily, a little girl, and her dog Dill. One morning Lily wakes to find Dill packing, the angels have told him it is time for him to go to heaven. Lily and Dill exchange ideas about what heaven will be like and they are quite different, Dill's is full of lampposts, meaty bones, and whiffy things to smell. Lily questions whether Dill will go UP or DOWN, listing some of his misdemeanours, but the angels will wait no longer, and she has to say goodbye. Lily misses Dill very much but eventually she gets a new puppy and she fills his life with lampposts, meaty bones, and whiffy things to smell, Dill looking down thinks the puppy must think he is in heaven!

This maybe gives us a clue to what is behind the parables about the kingdom of heaven. Our reading gives five parables about the kingdom and the first four are all about waiting. There would have been many followers of Jesus who were desperate for the Kingdom to come so that they would be released from the many oppressive regimes, however these metaphors demonstrate that waiting is a large part of building the Kingdom, and we know that ourselves. It takes a long time for a mustard seed to grow into a tree. These five metaphors are good examples of the hidden depths of Jesus parables. It is easy to see the obvious implication, even if we don't always like the message, but we need to turn these stories upside down to get the full meaning.

When we read about the yeast we need to forget our modern experience of baking with instant yeast and picture instead something similar to sourdough baking where a starter is cultured and part of it used and part kept and nurtured for the next loaf. There is usually plenty and often people pass on part of their starter to others. The amount of flour quoted in this story is large and the listeners would have been aware that only a little yeast would have been used, we might imagine the yeast

being hidden in the flour where it slowly begins to grow and transform the flour into dough but it takes time.

In the story about the treasure in the field we are told the finder re-buries it and then saves up to buy the field, again there is an element of waiting, something a little lost in our modern age of instant gratification. However, turn this story on its head and imagine it from the perspective of the original owner of the field. They were unaware of the treasure, and only when it is sold and the treasure is finally revealed openly do they realise what they have lost. Could this be a parable about recognising the treasure we already have in our lives? Are we in danger of doing this with our planet?

Looking at the story of the pearl we might imagine it is simply another version of the previous story, however again we need to look at this from a different angle. Pearls were the most precious and valuable things in the ancient world. We might assume that the man looking for the pearl of great price is a dealer rather than a jeweller, someone who has made their fortune from precious stones, perhaps they own many houses, have many businesses, in modern day parlance they might have a yacht or a racehorse. On finding the best pearl imaginable we are told this man sells everything to own it, where does that leave him? No houses, no businesses, no income, nothing but a very special pearl. The only way to live is to sell the pearl. To those listening this story would have seemed ridiculous and perhaps that is the point, the Kingdom is not about ownership or possessions, a grace-filled life is not on our shopping list, it costs everything and yet it costs nothing. The kingdom is about putting a different perspective on this life.

Our final story of the net is a little problematic as it comes in two parts, the first fits well with the parables of Jesus but the second is much more the voice of Matthew on judgement and separation. In the Jesus bit we have a story of a net being cast into the sea and many and varied fish being caught. It is estimated that in the sea of Galilee at that time there were probably around twenty different species of fish, some of which were deemed edible and others which were deemed unclean and not for eating, these would probably have been thrown back. The point about this parable, if we take just verse 47, is that the kingdom is inclusive and for all.

When we take this altogether we build a picture of something for which we are waiting but for which we have various clues, it may start small but our effort will grow something extraordinary, it may be hidden but if we look for the signs we will find it growing, often in unexpected places, and we should not be afraid of sharing what we find as there is more than enough to go around. If we are not aware of what we have, we may find someone else takes it. The Kingdom is not a possession it cannot be owned but is about gracious living and generous loving. The Kingdom is for all, and sometimes our gracious living and generous loving which will change how someone sees themselves and reveal God's love to them, growing the Kingdom of Love in ever new ways.

Creating heaven on earth, however we imagine heaven, will create the Kingdom of Love.

Prayers of concern and commitment

Loving God as we worship you together, we bring our concerns for the world, a world in which people are afraid and lonely, hungry and suffering. A world drawn together in the face of Covid 19 and yet pulled apart by injustice and unfairness, divided by the dictators and power politics of governments.

As we share together, we recognise that all too often we are longing for heaven instead of building the kingdom, may we imagine the finest heaven possible and learn to create, in the way of Jesus, a new tomorrow.

In your Kingdom there will be no poverty, no illness, no greed or selfishness and no injustice. Instead all will live in a loving, sharing generous world where every human has equal opportunity to follow their dreams and explore life in all its fullness.

Your love is unconditional, why then do we put conditions on our love, expecting people to fit our

vision of right instead of encouraging and exploring together the bigger picture of your kingdom. Why do we find forgiveness so difficult, when Jesus told us of your generous forgiveness, a forgiveness that can change lives?

As we wait in the hope of your kingdom may we learn to recognise our deepest desires and help each other to experience the fullness of our humanity. May we be more accepting and tolerant of the desires and needs of others. On the way of love may we find ways to share more generously and encourage those with gifts and skills we do not possess but which are needed to build the kingdom. May we be open to new ideas and welcome change, for that is the road to the kingdom. Help us to trust our oneness with you and live as people who can never be separated from you overwhelming love. Open our eyes to appreciate the treasure we have all around us; to recognise the pearl of great price that is the earth, and to show our love for you in the way we treat creation. Above all, help us to hear the story of net that catches all and excludes no-one and together build your kingdom of justice, joy and endless love welcoming all people on the way of discovery that is knowing you.

In Jesus name we pray. Amen

Our offering to God.

As we continue to worship apart but together, let us pledge our commitment to sharing in the work of our church by continuing to send our offering and exploring new ways of living generously, and may we know God's blessing on all we do. Amen

Hymn

The love of God is heav'n on earth, Tune Fulda
A meeting of all time and space;
A glimpse of life beyond this life;
A sense of God here face to face.

The love of God, when shared with friends,
Becomes a place of peace and joy
In laughter there we find our goal
In tears we sense our journey on.

The love of God brings close Christ's hope
A sense of one in mind and soul.
Rememb'ring through the bread and wine
the call to change and live for all.

The love of God sparks life in full;
A sense of purpose to our day,
Deep knowledge of God's world around,
A longing for Christ's chosen way.

The love of God is heav'n on earth,
A meeting of all time and space;
So let us lift our hearts to God
And learn to love within this place.

Heather Whyte 2012

Blessing

May the blessing that is the knowledge of God, source of all being, the love of God discovered through Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit which binds us together be with us on our journey this day and every day. Amen.