

Sunday Between 24th and 30th July [17]

Matthew 13:44-58

All of our readings this morning are powerful statements of the relationship between God and humanity. They tell of God's unfailing love and generosity towards us and our ability, when we recognise it, to truly respond to God with that part of us that is holy, that bit of ourselves that we might describe as spiritual in nature, our own image of God that dwells within each of us.

In the epistle from St Paul to the church in Rome, a very well known passage of scripture, not least because it is regularly heard at funeral services. They are comforting words at the end, where Paul tells us that in death we are no more separate from the love of God than we are in life. That is something we love to hear when we grieve, but it's important to hear it at other times too. This passage is not just about life and death, it is about all those things that would try to draw us away from God and it reminds us that God never draws away from us and so we need not fear such distractions. Paul reassures us that when we find it hard to pray, when we have no words, God hears the inarticulate cries of our hearts and our needs are understood. He teaches through his own experience that no earthly hardship needs to put us off our faith, how important to hear those words now if you are a Christian in Iraq, or in Syria or in the Holy Land where it is incredibly difficult to be a Christian today.

And then we have our gospel text where Jesus tries to tell us what it is like to glimpse the kingdom of heaven. His parables of the buried treasure and the extraordinary pearl conjure up in our minds the excitement of discovering something wonderful and unexpected in the most ordinary place. The picture Jesus paints is of the person making the discovery giving no thought to the consequences of acquiring this wonderful thing, but rather all logic and sensible thought is suspended because they know beyond reason that what they have found is more important than anything they own already. They can walk away from life as they have known it because this new way changes everything.

But then Jesus tells the parable of the fishing net and we are reminded that our relationship with God isn't one way. God draws to himself all those caught up in the net and yet we are told some are collected and others thrown away. This is the bit we struggle with, who is going to be kept and who will be thrown away? None of us like to think we are in the batch to be thrown out, and many of us worry that there are people in our lives, people we love who may not make it into the good fish basket. We cannot know who in or out, we know life is easier when someone can reassure us that we are going to be ok with God. But where we can be reassured is that if we can't tell who is in or out, neither can anyone else. If you come across a preacher who says, people who do this, or say that, or live in this way or have that sort of background are not welcome in God's kingdom then you have seen a false preacher. Jesus spoke of judgement, yes, but more than anything else he spoke of

love and forgiveness and whatever God's judgement looks like, it is unlikely to resemble human judgement too closely. As Jesus also says in this passage, teachers of the law become learners in the kingdom of heaven, times changed with Jesus and what his followers had understood of the teachings of judgement were constantly challenged in Jesus' actions and words.

But perhaps the most wonderful element of today's gospel reading is the realisation amongst Jesus' friends and family that he was speaking with an authority they could not deny but also an authority whose origins were a mystery. They know who his parents are, his father is not a holy man, a scribe or a Pharisee, but a carpenter. They know Jesus' brothers and sisters, they don't go around with a similar insights into the kingdom of heaven and God's relationship with humanity. They can't understand Jesus and they become afraid of him, jealous of his attention perhaps, defensive about him and they lack faith in him.

It is a bit like the difficulty of clergy ministering in the parishes where they were brought up, most would be uncomfortable doing that, those people know too much of about them. It is reassuring to know that in his incarnate form, God's relationship with humanity was affected in the same way as our relationships are affected, people see us in different ways depending on our relationship with them, and we often have little control over that.

And yet Jesus continued to bear witness even where he was rejected, it must have paid off in time, his mother was there at his crucifixion, his brother, James, led the Jerusalem church with Peter, God's relationship with humanity is constant, unending, based on love and instigated by him. May our prayer be that we too can catch a glimpse of that kingdom of heaven and be overwhelmed by its potential so that our lives are transformed in response to it and we can leave the cares of the world to themselves and seek after God's treasure, living in love and grace and sharing the same with those we meet.