

An Address by Jonathan Draper for Sunday 26th July 2020

Trinity 7: Wisdom and the Kingdom of Heaven

One of the small jobs I've had during the past few months, and one that has made me feel vaguely useful, has been driving to Plymouth nearly every week to collect a wide range of PPE for Hospiscare. St Luke's Hospice in Plymouth has been the central delivery point for PPE for hospices in the South West and they've got used to me turning up and filling the car with masks, gloves, hand gel, waste bags, and even, though thankfully not used, body bags. It has sometimes been an unusual carload and I wondered, especially early during lockdown, what the police would have made of it had they stopped me. Thankfully, it has all gone without incident and it's been good to play even a very small part in keeping Maggie and her colleagues and patients in the hospice safe. But small things, as we shall see, can be great in the reckoning of the kingdom of heaven.

Our readings this morning give us an opportunity to think about wisdom and about the kingdom of heaven. The OT reading is the well-known story of King Solomon being asked by God what he should be given for his faithfulness. Solomon famously replies that he would like the gift of wisdom so that he can govern God's people well. God is pleased with this request and grants it, so that Solomon is famous throughout the world for his wisdom. Because of this he is also given all that he didn't ask for: long life, riches, and honour.

Equally famously, and as a test of his wisdom, Solomon is confronted by two women who each claim a baby is theirs. One of the women's children had died in the night and been swapped for the other. Each claimed the child as her own, and there were no DNA tests in those days to be able to tell who was telling the truth. Solomon's response is a proposal to cut the baby in half and give half to each woman. The woman whose child it is not agrees to this; the other, who would rather her child lived even with another woman, does not. Solomon then decrees that the child belongs to the woman who did not agree. Justice is served and all Israel is amazed. I'm not sure you would be allowed to get away with that sort of approach if you are a judge in the Family Courts today.

The Gospel reading from Matthew contains five short parables each of which is designed to give us a sense of what the Kingdom of heaven is. Elsewhere, of course, Jesus reminds his hearers that the kingdom of heaven is not so much a place as it is a state of being: the kingdom of heaven is near you, he says, it is in you. It's less a place to which you aspire than it is a way of life.

The five little parables give us indicators of how we are to become the place of the kingdom of heaven, and they are all about small things that over time can do great things. They are, in fact, about wisdom and the disciplines of wisdom.

The five things are all small: a mustard seed, yeast, treasure, including a small pearl, and a fishing net. Apart from the treasure, they are all everyday things, the kinds of things a woman or a man might have at home. Perhaps that is the first thing to take from these little parables. Wisdom is not about the heroic, it is not just a mysterious gift of God bestowed only on the very exceptional. Learning wisdom is about the small things of everyday, about how we nurture the small seeds of faith and love we have until they grow and mature. Learning wisdom is about allowing the yeast of God's love in us to fill us and transform us. Learning wisdom is about recognising the treasure we have – the love we give and receive, the gifts we have been given, the skills we learn, the insights we have – recognising and prizing them above all else, using them to express the love of God within us. Learning wisdom is about being able to discern what is good and what is bad, what is helpful and what is not, what is loving and what leads to hate. Above all learning wisdom is about the discipline of taking what God has given you and making of it the most you can.

The prize here, the pearl of greatest price, is that learning the ways of wisdom is how we become the place of the kingdom of heaven. It's how others see in us the truth of the Gospel of God's love for the world. And people see this in what Jesus sometimes calls the fruit of a godly life, or in what St Paul calls the 'fruits of the Spirit': love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These, too, are small things – or at least they are great things that can be done and expressed in small ways, and it may be that we have seen some of that during the early stages of the pandemic and lockdown when people unselfconsciously looked after their neighbours, or isolated themselves to protect others, or even chose to wear a mask for the sake of the common good. These, too, are small and everyday things, but also treasure of great price. Most importantly they are the ways and disciplines of becoming the place of the kingdom of God; they are the ways and disciplines of wisdom.

This is also, perhaps, a way in which to understand the slightly enigmatic way in which this Gospel reading ends. Being trained for the kingdom of heaven, by following and developing the disciplines of love and wisdom, we are to be like the householder who brings something old and something new from his or her treasure. Perhaps, before the pandemic, you were a person who showed generosity towards family and friends – maybe in the time you give them, the ways you care for them, or even feed them. Perhaps this is the old in your treasury. Perhaps the new from your treasury is the way in which that generosity is now extended to others – through shopping for them, through donating to the foodbank, to ringing your neighbour to make sure they are OK. Perhaps the scribe who is trained for the kingdom of heaven is able to be flexible and imaginative, ready to do new things as times and contexts change. I suspect in the months, and maybe even years to come, we will all be called upon to be more imaginative than ever as we respond to a difficult, uncertain, and changing world. It is then that the discipline of the small things can lead to

something greater, can give us the foundations on which we can build and grow as we seek to serve others and become the place of the kingdom of heaven.