

Recorded Service – Sunday 26 July 2020

for Church of Scotland Congregations in Upper Tay Valley and Tenandry

(Rev. Robert Nicol at the Crannog Centre, Kenmore)

Welcome to this week's broadcast service for the congregations of the Upper Tay Valley and Tenandry.

Interview with Rachel Backhouse, Community Archaeologist, Crannog Centre

Our opening hymn is:

"How shall I sing that majesty which angels do admire?" (CH4 128)

It was written by John Mason in the 17th century, but the tune is 20th century by Kenneth Naylor, and has been described as "getting under the skin of the words". Mason pictures the scene in heaven where God is worshipped by angels and the redeemed, as described in the book of Revelation, and he wonders how he can possibly join in with that heavenly worship. But yet he can, because In Christ, heaven breaks into earth:

"where heaven is but once begun, there alleluias be."

And so too can we join in the heavenly worship, as we listen or join in with this recording by the Edinburgh University Singers, conducted by Ian McCrorie and with John Kitchen on the organ.

Prayer

Let us pray.

We read in our Bibles that heaven is the place where you are, and that it is a place of worship, where angels and the redeemed from human-kind praise you, as is your due. And they do this out of love – the love which flows from you to them, and which they reflect back to you. They are there in perfect relationship with you, unsullied by sin and evil.

And we wonder, who are we to join in that song of praise? We who are disobedient, forgetful and uncaring; who are too often more ready to follow our own thinking, and satisfy our own desires, than to listen to you and obey. Yet you invite us to join that worship, unworthy as we are.

In Jesus, you brought heaven to us on earth; in the Spirit, heaven is here, as close as our breathing, as real as our own heartbeat. And as we become aware of your presence, so heaven breaks in to earth, and we worship too, reflecting back to you the love you shower on us.

These great mysteries you have revealed to us through Christ. We thank you that he came amongst people such as us to show how life can be lived to the full; that he taught in words that had never been heard before; that he performed signs and wonders that had never been seen before; that he suffered and died in our place, once and for all, to free us from the burden of sin; that he invites us still to join him in the spiritual life we were made to enjoy, in which we are energised by love for God and for people.

May this place, at this time, become for us the holy place where we meet with you, our Lord and our God. Amen.

The hymn finished with the words:

"thy time is now and evermore,

thy place is everywhere."

We don't have to be in a church building to meet with God. Any place can become a holy place for us, as soon as we acknowledge God's presence with us. And as soon as we do become aware of his presence, we should also immediately be aware of our unworthiness to be there. This next song addresses that issue for us. It has been recorded by members of the Aberfeldy Worship Band:

"This is a holy place"

Interview with Olive and Ronnie Munro

Reading: Matthew 13:1-3a;31-33;44-52 (read for us by Ronnie Munro)

Sermon

In today's reading in Matthew, we are invited in to be part of the audience as Jesus preaches. We are on the lake-side, amongst an eager crowd, waiting to hear what this intriguing man has to say. In fact, the crowd has got so big that it is pushing down to the water's edge. Jesus gets into a boat which pushes off into the lake so everyone is able to see and hear him.

The word has gone around all the region of Galilee that this is someone worth listening to; someone who teaches about God and the Law with an authority unmatched by any of the other rabbis and religious leaders; someone whose words are accompanied by the most amazing actions.

But what we get today is not teaching or miracles, but a series of parables. These are, literally, stories which are 'laid alongside', or parallel to, the reality, in order to illustrate, or shed light on, the truth. But the original Hebrew word also suggests something else – an obscuring of meaning, so that the truth needs to be searched out. There is all of that in Jesus's parables.

His own followers, the disciples, are puzzled by this method of preaching, and ask him: "why are you speaking to them in parables?" And his answer is surprising: he seems to say he is using parables precisely so that the people will not understand.

When we look around the crowd we've joined, we can see four different types. Down at the water's edge are the twelve disciples, the closest followers, who accompany Jesus on his travels, and are being personally coached by him. To them, Jesus says he is revealing the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. To them, in private, he explains in detail what some of these parables mean.

Then there are others who have come because they are genuinely seeking to know Jesus, who hang on his every word, and who long to hear more. For them, the parables are stories which get them thinking, and will bring them closer to the truth.

There are others who've just turned up because something is happening, and they've come to observe. To them, the parables are unsettling stories, containing puzzling features, which challenge them to think, and which can maybe knock them out of their complacency.

But then there is another group, standing together at the edge of the crowd. These are the religious leaders who are deeply suspicious of what Jesus is up to, and have come to gather any incriminating evidence against him, waiting to hear if he says anything against their understanding of God and religion. For them the parables are obscure, difficult to interpret, and not much good as evidence in a court of law.

So, for those who will listen and think, the parables are full of insights into the purposes of God; for those whose minds are closed, they are no more than stories which may entertain, but which will take them nowhere.

In the parables Matthew records from the sermon that day, there are two longer ones, which are both well-known – the parable of the sowing of the seed, and the parable of the weeds amongst the wheat. But there are also the short parables we've just heard.

Each tells us something different about the kingdom. For those in the crowd who believe the kingdom of God is elsewhere, and certainly isn't being brought into being on earth by Jesus, these stories won't say anything. But I'm going to align myself with those who are listening, who want to learn, whose minds are open. I'm willing to be challenged. For such as us, we will go off afterwards and talk about these memorable little stories and discuss what they could have meant. We'll pick up on their oddities – the things which make us wonder if there is more to them than we got on first hearing.

Take the one about the mustard seed. We get the idea that Jesus is telling us the kingdom begins as something insignificant, hardly noticeable even, but yet grows to something huge. That's a great encouragement to the small band of disciples; later, it will also be a great encouragement to Matthew's church, the people he originally wrote his Gospel for, who were small in number, surrounded by other groups who would have told them they'd got it wrong, and that their movement would never amount to anything.

But there's something not quite right about the story, which bothers us as we walk home. The mustard seed is very small, right enough. And the mustard plant grows into a large shrub – so much so that it can be a nuisance – not really what you'd want in your small garden. But it doesn't become a huge tree. So, is Jesus saying here: "don't put limits on how big you think the kingdom can grow. Watch, and be astonished". Sure enough, the reach of the Christian faith in the world has gone way beyond the boundaries of the then-known world, to lands they couldn't possibly have imagined, to numbers of people they could have no idea about. And it's still growing.

The parable of the yeast also has a couple of surprises. On the face of it, just a little story of a woman baking bread for her family. But the quantity is huge – about 50 lb (23 kilos) – enough for a village. And the other surprise is that yeast in the Bible is usually associated with evil and wrong-thinking, which is what some thought Jesus was guilty of. So, it becomes a subversive story, which speaks of the extravagance of God's blessing to those who will listen and believe.

Literally, the text says the woman 'hid' the yeast on the flour. It wasn't evident that the kingdom was here, but its effect would be seen nonetheless.

After Jesus had told these parables, Matthew tells us he withdrew from the crowds and went back into the house he was staying in. He took just his disciples with him, and he told them the other three little parables we heard. These stories spoke to them, who had left their normal lives behind, in order to be with Jesus full time. These stories said that it would all be worthwhile, because finding the kingdom of God is worth everything. Matthew takes us into that room to hear the conversation.

At first sight, the parable of the treasure in the field and the parable of the pearl of great value seem to be saying the same thing – that being in the kingdom of God is of such value that it's worth giving up everything else for it. But there is a subtle difference.

In the first, it appears that the man who found the treasure found it by accident. He wasn't looking for it, but when he did find it and realised what it was, he was filled with joy. In the second story, the merchant was looking for fine pearls when he came across this one, against which the others paled into insignificance. This speaks of different ways that people come to faith in Christ, and it tells the disciples to expect both. Out in that crowd earlier in the day, there were people actively seeking the truth, and he would find it in Jesus. There were others who came along for the event, but found themselves challenged by these stories to think again about their lives. It's no different today. Individuals seek after God and find him; others are not even thinking about it, but are suddenly surprised to be confronted by the living God.

The final parable in this set is perhaps the most difficult for us. The scene Jesus describes is back out on the lake with the fishermen casting a net into the sea. It was a drag net, either fixed between two boats, or between one boat and the land. As it was tightened it would catch everything in its path. The fishermen would then drag it onto the shore and set about sorting the catch into the good fish and the bad. And Jesus says: "This is how it will be at the end of the age."

The judgement, the separation. Something we may prefer not to think about. We may hope there will be mercy for all. But think of it this way – what if there were no judgement at the end of the age? Where would justice be? Don't we need to know that there will be no wickedness in heaven? That sin and its terrible consequences will have no place in heaven? That those who were denied justice on earth will see justice before God? For 2000 years that has been the hope of slaves, of the abused, the starving, the abandoned, the terrorised, the downtrodden. The evil must be separated out – from ourselves, too. We can't take our selfishness, our jealousy, our envy, our lust, or any of these things, into heaven. Judgement is actually good news. And if we worry about what will happen to those who in this life do not come to faith, as we surely should, we should do our best to make Christ known to them, and leave the judging to the only one who can judge the whole of a life justly.

And of course, this does not mean we can be complacent about the state of the world and its people. We are commanded to seek and work for justice on earth.

At the end of this, Jesus asks his disciples: "Have you understood all these things?" They reply "Yes". Really? I wonder. They had so much more to learn. But that's the thing – we continue to learn about God and his ways as we go through life. There is always more to learn about his kingdom. It's one of the things which makes the Christian life exciting and worthwhile.

Finally, what does it mean to live in God's kingdom, while we are still living in the world? These parables are telling us that things are not as they seem. The world is certainly a mixture of good and evil, and sometimes it seems like the evil people have the upper hand. But Jesus tells us something different – that reality is really God's kingdom, his reign, and in the end that always triumphs.

So, if you believe in Jesus, no matter how faint and wobbly that faith is, you have entered his kingdom, and that makes all the difference in the world. Now, can anything keep you from God's love in Jesus? Can the voice within you which tells you that you will never be good enough, keep you from God's love? Can that memory of abuse which you can't shake off and which has blighted your life; can it keep you from God's love? Can that grief which seems to have no end? Can that sense of failure and irretrievably lost time?

Hear these words from the Apostle Paul to the citizens of the kingdom:

Reading: Romans 8:31b-39 (read by Olive Munro)

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray

Father God, we thank you for these wonderful words of assurance, that there is nothing and no-one that can come between us and your love in Christ Jesus our Lord. In the midst of our fears and our doubts, you are there. As we suffer illness and injury, you are there. As we cope with the challenges of aging bodies and minds, you are there. As we are troubled by memories of what has been said and done to us in the past, you are there. You never give up on us.

Through the work of Jesus, we are being made new; fitted for being citizens of your kingdom. We praise you that the kingdom is growing like a great tree; spreading like yeast, often unseen, un-noticed by the world, but yet the effect is everywhere.

We pray for those who have not heard this good news – both those who are seeking, and those who are not. May they hear with their ears and respond in their hearts.

We pray for all those who are bringing the good news: for preachers, for missionaries, for Bible translators, for youth and children's workers, for chaplains, for ministers, priests and pastors; for all of us Christians who witness to the hope we have in Jesus through our work, our leisure and amongst our friends and families. May the branches of the kingdom tree continue to grow; may the kingdom yeast continue to spread.

We pray for those who have been deeply affected by the Covid pandemic. We think of those who have lost loved ones; those whose jobs and income have disappeared; those who are fearful for what the future will bring for them and their families. We think of the lost opportunities, the changes in life direction, the unsettling of assumptions.

We pray for those lands which are having a far worse crisis than we have experienced in Britain. Where the health and care services are inadequate for the task; where the virus has added to existing problems of malnutrition, and overcrowding, and disease. Where governments have responded with a lack of care and compassion, and sometimes with brutal disregard for life and well-being. We pray for all those striving to bring help; we pray for those trying to influence decision-making for better outcomes.

We thank you that in our own area here, we have seen a new commitment to community; and a generous giving of time and money to help others. May we not lose all that has been good about this time, but inspire us to build on it.

We bring to you in our prayers those who are known to us who particularly need your comfort and support today. In the silence we name them before you now.....

We pray together now in the words Jesus taught his disciples:

Our Father, who art in heaven; hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,

for ever. Amen

Our final hymn is:

"Thanks to God whose word was spoken in the making of the earth" (CH4 605)

It is sung in this recording by the St Magnus Festival Chorus, conducted by Glynis Hughes, accompanied by Jean Leonard.

Benediction

God has spoken; God is speaking. Listen for his voice, and hear him say to you that nothing, absolutely nothing, will be able to separate you from his love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And the blessing of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with each of you, this day and for ever. Amen.