

15th Sunday Year A

Romans 8.18-25 (sic), Matthew 13.1-9

For some people, one positive to come out of these difficult times has been a rediscovery of the joys of nature. I have greatly enjoyed watching the ripening of the fruits of the orchard in Worcester College, and since no-one else is around at the moment I felt no guilt at all in helping myself to some plums this week. I should perhaps add that fruit picking on my part is to some extent an attempt to persuade my son Michael that some things which grow should be eaten and some should not, since his attitude to the consumption of vegetation is basically that of a goat. Or perhaps I should say giraffe, not just because he has a love of eating leaves, but also because he has been growing to such an extent in the last few months that we have speculated whether he had stumbled into Wonderland and found some cakes marked “eat me”.

For some the growth of children is problematic – a reminder of time already past, years lost that cannot be recovered. But for others it is nothing other than the working out of hope and expectation, the promise of future life coming into being before our very eyes. The growth of which Jesus speaks is very much of the latter kind, but it does not always manifest itself so obviously. That is, of course, the point. The Kingdom of God is present among us, growing secretly and unseen, promising to become the greatest of all shrubs and trees but at the moment a seed not just tiny, but hidden from us beneath the earth.

The gospels use the image of growth in a number of different ways. To bring out the theme of secrecy, to emphasise the enormity and the inclusion of the kingdom, and also to remind us that the new life of the kingdom will come about through the death of the one who is its king – unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12.24).

In the famous parable of the sower, which we heard this morning, the trials of the kingdom are shown to us alongside the future plenitude which proclamation of the kingdom promises. It used to be the case that scholars found the key to this parable in the history of agricultural practices. In first century Palestine, did sowing come before ploughing? Many suggested that it did. The extraordinary abandon with which the sower casts his seed is then explained by the process which will follow, whereby that seed will be ploughed into the land which is churned up to make it, or at least some of it, fertile. The seeds are thrown all over the place, but it is the subsequent violence of the ploughing which enables some of it to bear fruit. The parallels with the gospel message would then seem clear: the word is spread broadly, but the world in which it is spread is approaching the crisis of God's judgement, a crisis which in Matthew's gospel is played out through the passion and death of Jesus Christ. At the end of the gospel we are given the great commission to the apostles

to make disciples of all the nations. The fruit of the gospel has yet to be harvested.

In fact, the order of activity seems to make little difference. Surely the point of Jesus' parable is that the sowing is done in a rather free for all manner, and that much of the seed is lost. The actual process doesn't seem to matter, just the fact that the fates of the seed are different. Much is lost but some springs up in quite extraordinary abundance. Sevenfold was reckoned a good yield, but we have thirty and sixty and a hundred fold. It's the growth which matters. The parable's concentration is on the contrast between the before and the after. For some seed, growth proves impossible but for the seed which does spring out, that which is produced goes well beyond what any reasonable person could have hoped for.

That hope is also an essential theme of Paul's letter to the Romans. The lections this morning halted our epistle reading too early, and so we extended it by a

couple of verses, ending not with endurance but with hope. Stating clearly that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us”, Paul goes on to reflect that our trials are merely part of a universal narrative of rebirth, in which creation groans with the labour pains of the new life which will transform all worldly existence. We too join in this travail as we wait for Christ’s redemption, but, crucially, we wait for this redemption in hope. In other words, we have reason to look forward to God’s coming salvation. We are not guilty of blind optimism nor of Mr Micawber’s touchingly pathetic assumption that something will turn up. Rather, we have seen the future already, because our story has become united with the story of Jesus Christ, the narrative which unites suffering and redemption in the glory that is Christ crucified as well as Christ risen triumphant from the dead.

Expectation, and looking forward, are natural to us all in times of trial. For many people, the rest of this

calendar year and more will be largely lost to the necessary caution which sees limited activity and personal contact. Holiday plans have been cancelled, hoped for celebrations put on hold. Personally, I have been wondering whether the impossibility of a party means that I can simply be let off from turning fifty next month, and claim that it hasn't happened. Seriously, however, for Christians the task of looking forward is the task of hope and not just of optimism. That hope means acknowledging and responding to the problems of the present. As some begin a return to normality, others cannot and must be the object of our concern and our attention. As some give thanks for recovery, others mourn loved ones departed, and still more fear for jobs and for livelihoods. Our call is to see, to hear and to act.

The good news of the gospel must be good news for everybody. Christian hope is centred upon God but it is so centred in the knowledge that God is present in the here and now, not distant and far off in a remote future paradise. The hope with which Christians look forward

is the hope that the kingdom will indeed be manifest – that the hungry will be fed, the sick healed, the poor blessed and the structures of pride and power and violence be uprooted and overturned. Christian hope, in other words, is not the anticipation that things will happen to us. Rather, it is the recognition that we are called to look to the future and to do something about it here and now in the present. The work of the kingdom will always be largely unnoticed, growing out of nothing just like the seed thrown on to the ground. But the plenitude of the harvest will be impossible unless we work together in hope.