

SERMON, 26 JULY 2020, DA – Romans 8.26-end, Matthew 12.31-33,44-52

“Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the Kingdom of Heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” – that’s a pretty good text for where we are now (although when I used it at home, Julie asked what I knew about being the master of a household. I pointed out that Selwyn the cat is the one really in charge of our household).

“Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the Kingdom of Heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old”.

You know what I am going to say. We are good with the old. This is not where we expected to be just a year after our Bicentenary celebrations, but we’ll use our old building the best we can. [At St Edmund’s next week we look forward to re-opening with a new ceiling, looking very shiny and impressive]. It was fascinating doing a couple of funerals recently where people wanted the church building, even though they’re not church people. They were so grateful when I said we could be here, in this place. It is frustrating, why aren’t they here more often? – but it is also comforting. It has been lovely sitting down with wedding couples again this week and, even though they can’t sing, even though numbers are limited, they want a church wedding. It’s interesting that some of them are quite chuffed when told that congregation numbers are limited to 30 people, it makes it so much easier to tell Great Aunt Flo that she can’t come – though one groom did wonder if we could limit the numbers even more so his mother-in-law couldn’t be fitted in!

Old words are also a comfort. “Nothing can separate us from the love of God. I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” Paul writes to the Romans, and 2,000 years later, his words are a comfort. We’ve used the 23rd Psalm at most funeral recently – if we can’t sing, there are words that are a comfort, 3,000 year old words, relevant in now. More modern words too – Footprints is always popular, you know the one, there were two sets of footprints. But when my life was difficult, there’s only one. That, says God, is when I carried you. The Crematorium now has TV screens at the front of each chapel for the broadcasting of tributes etc – but when the screen is at rest, it is showing a photo of a beach with footprints. A poem that is younger than me, now an old piece of wisdom.

I am worried about what we are doing with the old. This week Birmingham Museum and Art Galleries have told their staff that 20% of them are likely to

made redundant – a tragedy for the staff, but worrying for the collections and the care of our countries’ heritage. There were a bunch of church photographers getting angry on social media the other day that churches are still locked an inaccessible – I pointed out to them just how much work it is taking to open buildings safely, and wondered if any of them were involved in cleaning and opening their own local churches. That made me popular! But they have a point. If churches remain closed, if congregation and community are not willing or able to come in, we will have lots of closing churches. A recent report has suggested 70% of Welsh places of worship will not be open in 20 years’ time. I think that’s a tragedy – other Christians are glad we’re separating faith from buildings and believe the church will be much stronger when we close these old buildings and worship differently. This last week Sheffield Cathedral announced the closure of their choir. It’s a decision partly driven by money – and the financial position of English Cathedrals is horrendous – but also by ideology. To some it is an opportunity to move on, to a new world, new music, new ways of worship, to others it is a betrayal of the past, the best, the old and beautiful, a betrayal of the soul of the Cathedral – and a betrayal of the musicians.

I love the way that the Gospel reading starts with the little glimpses of the Kingdom of God. The mustard seed – and I’ve told the story before about how we planted mustard and cress at one harvest festival in a country church, and within a month the carpet was growing. Angry churchwarden, marvellous sermon illustration! An acorn into an oak tree, the huge trees in the Vicarage garden. The yeast in the bread – there’s a story for lockdown. I didn’t get as far as bread – rock cakes, scones, rhubarb cake, flapjack, that’s about limit of my culinary skill – but we know the importance of yeast. Treasure, the pearl, what you don’t expect – and I hope most of us have become better at finding the Kingdom of Heaven in the midst of all this.

As I said last week, we must celebrate the little things, the victories, the little wins – because without them, life is unbearable. It’s a tiny little virus that has caused all of this, a tiny little virus we are continuing to fight – and that little virus has come very close to overwhelming us. It has caused suffering, death, hatred, evil – we fight it on a global scale, with huge resources, but many of the victories will only be small. Yet we add up all the small victories, and then the scales don’t seem so out of balance.

I went into Walter Evans School on Friday afternoon to say goodbye to the year 6s as they go off to Secondary School. They managed to get everyone in for games on the field, pizza, and a short farewell before they were clapped out. I have no doubts that our youngsters have suffered in their education, and some of them will have suffered in home life, the teachers looked exhausted, many

parents are already tired of having kids at home, and only now are the holidays starting. Incredibly difficult times. But there were friends together, young people with their friends, youngsters saying thank you for their time in school, youngsters looking forward to new schools and new adventures. It was a glimpse of the Kingdom. I didn't think I'd done much to support the school over the last four months, but several teachers thanked me so much for my videos about different bible passages which I'd done over the last few weeks, videos they said were very helpful. While I was at school, Julie hosted the children of St Edmund's Pre-school who came to our garden at the end of their term – and we have another bunch of people very grateful to the church for all the help we've given in enabling them to use the Hall for the last few weeks, and now the School's Out Club starts, and they are grateful too.

Jesus talks about the good fish and the bad fish – all collected together, and sorted out eventually. Again, that continues the theme of last week – we are not going to rebuild a perfect world now, we might even struggle to rebuild a better world, but we called to work with God.

Old things, and new. Building on some of things that we have taken up in lockdown, and making sure that good lessons we have learned are not immediately dropped. I've made time to explore local footpaths and get fitter – I must not go back to my old, far-too-busy-for-a-walk lifestyle. My diet is better – I must not go back to my old, far-too-busy-to-cook-properly lifestyle. Many of us have far more contacts than we had before, we mustn't lose them all. Many churches have found that video and the internet have opened up their worship, their community, to all sorts of new people. That's a challenge. Many churches have worked with different people in their communities, made new contacts, new friends – how do we foster and develop those friendships. Lots of challenges.

We are also having to take on new things that we don't like. Masks, social distancing, worship that is different. In every circumstance, the same question “where is the Kingdom of God in this”? In the Kingdom of God there will be no masking, no social distancing, and we can sing our hearts out – but we are not there yet. Yet we catch glimpses of the Kingdom here and now. The realisation that every human being matters – that is a basic Christian principle that the world seems to ignore. Everyone matters – so I will respect their distance, I will wear that mask, I will understand when someone with a disability (visible or invisible) is not able to. People are frightened, people are tired, people will get cross, lose their temper, shout back. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”. I may have to gently say to someone “please wear a mask”, I may get a torrent of abuse. If I do, it will hurt – it always does – but I will try and understand their fear, their anger, what is making them so cross.

I went home after last week's service with a splitting headache. It was the stress levels of having to do something different, something I was worried about. In reality I didn't need to be stressed, we'd done the planning, the preparation. I had churchwardens both with a sense of quiet efficiency – and a huge thank you to Peter and David, we are so fortunate. Everyone was lovely, all went fine. Last week we caught a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. I hope we have/we will today – I hope we will next week, in both churches.

Remember, too, our friends who aren't with us – those who are not happy about being out. Phone them, chat to them, keep in touch with them – make sure we do that as a church, as well as doing it as individuals.

I hope that in your work and your families, in life in general, you catch many glimpses of the kingdom of God. When you do, share them with others, tell us about them, use them for good. When the Kingdom of God seems a long way away, continue to do what you have been doing – pray, talk, be there for each other.

I was cooking yesterday morning, and listening to Last Word on BBC Radio 4. It's the obituary programme, and I'm a month behind. They gave the obituary of Pierre Nkurnziza, the President of Burundi – that was a story of genocide, violence, torture, the long-standing ethnic hatred between Hutu and Tutsi. An horrendous story, but the contributor dared to suggest that the country might be able to build in a better way now their President is dead and change is possible. Then Larry Kramer, the outspoken gay rights campaigner – I thought that some of the world, some of our attitudes have moved on because of people like him and the battles they fought. Then Geoffrey Burnstock, a neurobiologist – I didn't understand any of what they said about him, but then they mentioned that he was involved in the development of the drug clopidogrel, and I remembered that Gareth used to take what he called cloppi-dog – so thank you Dr Burnstock.

Finally we had the obituary of Dame Vera Lynn. That was encouraging, a reminder of what gets us through a crisis. The number of times I've had "We'll meet again" at a funeral, it is one of those songs. (And I'm sure I've told you about the time when we put "We'll meet again" on and for some reason there was a delay in the undertakers walking up, shouldering the coffin, turning round, and walking out. By the time we left the church the CD was playing "wish me luck as you wave me goodbye").

We catch the Kingdom of God in many different and wonderful ways. Thanks be to God!