

Sunday Between 3 & 9 July 2008
Canon Barlow

Responsibility:

[Based on the Gospel for today viz: Matthew 11:15-19, 25-30]

The circumstances which led to Jesus' comments in today's Gospel passage was the query by John the Baptist whether Jesus was in fact the expected Messiah, or did they have to go on waiting for the promise to be fulfilled.

John was in prison, having been put there because of his outspoken condemnation of the marriage of Herod, the Tetrach or Governor of Galilee, to his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. John, like most of his generation, had been expecting a Messiah who would come with fiery judgment. So it is not surprising that he wondered during his long lonely hours of imprisonment, whether Jesus was that long-expected Deliverer. After all, he must have heard that Jesus was keeping company with the very sinners and spiritual derelicts on whom he had called down the condemnation of God. He had looked for imminent judgment and the overthrow of wrong and the vindication of right. The ministry of Jesus had impressed him—but was this all that was to be expected from the Mighty One of God? Where was the flame and fire and thundering damnation from God? Why were the hypocritical priests and Pharisees allowed to continue their corrupt ways?

Jesus was deeply sensitive to John's perplexity. If he were to be rescued from disillusionment and despair, he must somehow be brought to the realization that God's promises about the Messiah whose coming he had foretold, had already come true, though not in the way he had expected. All that Jesus could do was to point to aspects of His own ministry in language which would remind John of the pictures of the messianic age drawn in the Book of Isaiah. "The blind receive sight; the lame walk; those who have leprosy are cured; the deaf hear; the dead are raised; and the Good News is preached." (11;5)

Turning to the people, Jesus affirmed that John was indeed the new Elijah who was to herald the coming of the Kingdom. "This is the one about whom it is written: I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." (v.10)

John had certainly prepared the way for Jesus, for those who had listened to the one were ready to listen to the other. Tax collectors and others lumped together under the heading of sinners, as well as others like Nicodemus, who came to Jesus secretly, and Joseph of Aramathaea who later gave his own tomb for Jesus' burial; the centurion whose daughter had been healed; the ruler whose daughter had been brought back to life, turned to hear and were ready for the richer message of the Gospel. Others, sinners and religious people alike, would not listen to either John or Jesus. In solemn condemnation Jesus denounces them for their failure to respond to God's call. John the Baptist and Jesus have both called for repentance and a turning to God, but the Jews have not heeded either of them. They are like petulant bad-tempered children, Jesus says, unable to be pleased. When their playmates are in serious mood, they whine that they don't want to play anything but festivals; when others are joyful they want to play funerals. John came to them as an ascetic, living on the cheapest food available—locusts and wild honey, and they said of him, as they also said of Jesus: "He is possessed by a demon." Jesus was not an

ascetic, so they called Him licentious and irreligious and a friend of sinners: “a glutton and a drunkard”. A lovely line in a commentary says: “The Jews found John too unsociable to be sane; and Jesus too sociable to be moral”.

Turning away from the critics and nitpickers, Jesus burst into a great prayer of thanksgiving and praise in which He expresses His consciousness of His unique Sonship, gives God the glory for the gift of the Gospel to people of innocence, and offers them the tranquil confidence which comes from faith in Him, and the blessedness of accepting the “yoke” of His service.

One of the themes of this part of St Matthew’s Gospel is the alternatives being offered: faith or unbelief. It is a theme repeated over and over again by the authors of Holy Scripture, that this alternative is always before us—to believe in God or to disbelieve; to trust in God or to mistrust; to obey God or to disobey. But these writers do not say that this choice is entirely in one’s own hands; on the contrary, they say that to believe is a gift or blessing from God, and that to disbelieve is also the result of the action of God. For example, St Paul, writing to the Roman Christians quotes from the Book, Exodus, where God says to Moses: “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion”. (9-15) Similarly in this passage, Matthew records Jesus giving thanks to God “because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children”. Hiding the promises of the Kingdom from some and revealing it to others seems like a good “out” for skeptics and unbelievers: “I couldn’t help myself; you never told me”!

Nevertheless these actions of God are not capricious and unrelated to the lives of men and women. God hides the truth from the “wise and learned”, that is, from those who in their arrogance and pride refuse to listen and act; refuse to change their ways; to repent. But He reveals it to the “little children”, that is, to the open-minded, the humble, and the lowly of heart. This is the will of God, and Jesus gives thanks that it is so. He declares that He has been appointed by God as the revealer of God’s Law, and invites all those who are oppressed—physically, mentally, spiritually—to believe in Him; to learn His Law; and to enter the Kingdom. He promises that His Law is not difficult or complicated, like that of the scribes and Pharisees, but is easy to learn: it is the Law of love.

The yoke which Jesus invites His followers to take on, refer to the harness by which a pair of oxen were harnessed together to share the load. It is good to imagine ourselves yoked together with Christ as we struggle with the load of our griefs and troubles in life. Or a yoke may be a frame which goes across a person’s neck and shoulders, for carrying a balanced load—that suggests that in taking on the yoke of Christ we are setting ourselves to share His burden of care and love. His yoke is easy and His burden is light, if we walk in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

In the complicated argument which Paul set out in the Epistle to the Romans, as we have put before us today and several Sundays, he is pointing up the difference between the old Law of Moses with its multitude of subsections creating a heavy load for those who would be holy, and the spiritual Law which brings life and peace. He knows that physically he himself finds it difficult to keep the old Law, and his sinfulness impedes him. He delights in the Law of God, and knows it brings freedom. So he asks, rhetorically, because he knows the answer: “Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!” “Come to me,” Jesus says, “All you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls”. **Amen.**

Sunday between 10 & 16 July 2008

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

“A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path ... some fell on rocky ground ... other seeds fell among thorns ... other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!” (Matthew 13:3-9) Of course today’s farmer ensures that every seed is placed in the best possible situation for it to grow, but in our Lord’s day, seeding was very hit or miss, with the seed scattered by hand as the farmer walked up and down his field.

Much of ministry is like our Lord’s parable. A great deal of seed is sown—not just by preaching but by every act of support and encouragement and teaching and example which Christian people give. So there is reassurance and encouragement in today’s Gospel passage: not only for clergymen who travel miles and are available at any and every hour of the day and night, but also for all the faithful Christian men and women who become at times frustrated, tired, and even angry, in the apparent lack of response and interest, which they encounter as they serve Christ and His Church. For some seed did fall into good soil, and that brought results in abundance. Our Lord was setting out the optimistic principle that whatever hindrances we faithful ones encounter in our work for Him—hard ground, rocky ground, thorny ground—the ultimate rewarding conclusion is a rich harvest. We must stop playing the numbers game, and rejoice in the quality of the lives being offered to

Christ in worship and service. It is not a matter of how many people hear the Word of God, but how they receive it, and what difference it makes in their lives.

Some receive it as seed falling on a path—that is to say they hardly receive it at all. It merely lies on the surface of their lives. Not that paths are wicked things. They take you places; they guide you safely through rough or boggy patches. Society needs people with minds of their own who have hacked out a pathway through the rough country of life. But they are, at times, hard to reach to bring to Christ.

Some receive the Word of God as stony soil on thin soil or as soil thinly spread over a rock substratum. It takes root, but not deeply. Yet rock and stone are useful materials. Bridges built of it do not fall down or twist in high winds as readily as those of steel and concrete. Cathedral built of it last for hundreds of years. One wonders whether modern houses will last as long as old-fashioned stone buildings. We ought not write-off the solid, not easily persuaded people. But is disappointing when they show an interest and then just fade out of the picture. Into this category too come people who are the opposite of steady and solid—the shallow whose attention may be briefly caught, but when they discover that belonging to the Body of Christ means more than being entertained for an hour on Sunday mornings, they fade away. It was not a real conversion—simply a brief superficial interest.

Where thistles and weeds grow we know growth of useful plants is possible. We don’t discard weed-covered ground as useless. Such a paddock might take a lot of cultivation and working, but it can become valuable crop-land. Previously it would have been pointless merely to toss seed into it. Similarly with people whose lives are full of all sorts of preoccupations which they let take precedence over worship and service to God.

When the somewhat hit and miss evangelistic efforts of the Church seem to us to be

inefficient and futile, remember how God works in Creation. Millions of sperms are produced to fertilize one single egg to create one life! Uncountable seeds are produced by a tree every year, yet only the tiniest fraction ever propagate! God is so liberal, so generous in His provision, and He makes the sun shine on good and bad people alike, sending rain on both the honest and the dishonest. Can His Church be any less generous in its reaching out, offering teaching and guidance and practical help and support to all and sundry who happen along? We rejoice certainly in those who respond, but we ought not fret too much about those who do not. Surely that is in the nature of the way God acts, without keeping the score. Jesus too knew the pain of people turning away from what He had to offer. St John records that He said on one occasion: "No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father". After this many of His disciples drew back and no longer went about with Him". (John 6:66) Seed sown even by Jesus fell on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns. But some fell on good soil, and in that same passage, a few verses on, Peter says: "You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God".

All this has been about the seed being the Word of God taken as meaning the teachings of Holy Scripture about God and His will and His love for us, and His desire to welcome us into His kingdom.

St John, in his Gospel, used the term "Word of God" for Jesus in the introduction: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us". And that widens the whole perspective of this parable when we think of it with that interpretation of the phrase. Apply that meaning, the parable is saying that Jesus Christ wants to enter into the hearts of all men and women, but some are not interested and reject Him; others are interested at first, but fade away when they find what being a Christian might mean, and still others always mean to do something about it but just never get around to facing up.

The interesting thing about the Parable of the Sower is that firstly we are told the story and invited to make what we can of it: "Let anyone with ears listen". Then through the enquiry of the disciples, who seem to be a bit slow to work it out, Jesus spells it out. On the face of it, Jesus is talking about the success or otherwise of His ministry: He is the sower, delivering His message to all and sundry, and meeting with various responses. But then Jesus suggests that those especially close to Him might see further into the meaning of the story. Now the emphasis is changed. The seed is the Word of God, but the point now is on the character of the situation where that sown seed falls: the four different types of hearers—then unheeding, the shallow, those distracted by trouble or self-seeking, and the sincere and open-minded.

It is these latter ones, who having some knowledge of the Word of God—either with the meaning "Holy Scripture" or "the Word of God made Flesh" continue to be open and receptive to the inspiration and strength of the Holy Spirit, and so the Word of God is able to produce those results which lead to eternal life. **Amen.**

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

20th July 2008

Sunday between 17 & 23 July 2008

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

[Reference: Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43]

Again this Sunday, as with last week, we have a parable ending up: "He who has ears, let him hear". In both cases Jesus did not explain the meaning of His parable to the masses: He expected people to work it out for themselves and apply it as necessary. Last Sunday it was the parable of the Sower and the Seeds which fell on various types of ground—on the pathway, on rocky ground, among thorns, and on good soil, referring to the reaction of the various kinds of people who either received the Word of God, Jesus and His preaching, or rejected it. Today we have a variation on that theme. This time the seed is sown on good soil all right, and takes root and grows. But it comes into competition with weeds.

How often have we heard people say: "If there is a God, why doesn't He do something about all the awful things which happen in the world which He allegedly created?"

When we look back across the history of the world, from the very earliest of records—and we can assume the situation was the same prior to that—until our own time like right now, there is an endless, sickening record of starvation, cruelty, and warfare: of man's brutality to man. The many forms of evil tend to be a constant factor in every civilization that has ever arisen. Indeed with the development of ever larger and more powerful weapons, no end of the destruction of life and property is in sight. Not that brutality depends upon might and explosive power: the simple cruelty of one individual to another is recorded by the media day in and day out. So we ask: "Why doesn't God do anything about the evil in the world?" Holy Scripture after all affirms that God is the ruler and creator of all things, and Jesus Christ is the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit pours out grace and inspiration upon us, and presumably the rest of the human race. So then, why hasn't He done anything about evil?

Of all His creatures, God has given to the human race the unique gift of free will. Every other creature acts and reacts automatically, instinctively, without having to reason out what to do next and why; without any sense of right and wrong; of morality; of sin. Our gift of free will is unlimited and we are free to do good or evil and God will not intervene: the gift is not a gift if it is entailed and limited. And every member of the human race, with the one exception of Jesus of Nazareth, chooses and has chosen to misuse that gift from time to time, one way or another, often to the detriment of others. Some of that misuse is relatively minor and readily forgiven; other affects the health, comfort and safety of millions. The root cause is the same: disobedience of God's will.

This parable of our Lord's recorded by Matthew states that God has acted. He has promised to separate the good from the evil, and then to destroy the evil. We don't know how and we don't know when, for the catch is that this will be done in His own good time, not in ours. Our time is different from His, and we become impatient with God because we do not see any immediate results. We need to understand that the willingness of God to tolerate the existence of evil in the world, and not to destroy it in one stroke, is not because He is weak or inactive or incapable. He looks to the human race to turn to Him, voluntarily, for the solution to the world's evil, to seek Hi

sway, to seek His inspiration, to seek His spiritual power to overcome temptation and the power of Satan.

It is trite to say that the human race is comprised of individuals, but it is, and we tend to overlook that as we speak of nations and groups of people acting for good or evil. So each individual person has to individually turn to Christ before the kingdoms of this world can become the kingdom of Christ. And there is only one person over whom we have any real control - our self. So firstly, God's tolerance of evil is a call to repentance. We tend to think that evil only exists "out there", in the actions of other nasty people, or groups, or nations. Yet if God did decide to destroy evil, where would He stop? We like to think He would stop somewhere short of us, because our sins are only little mistakes and aberrations of our usual niceness. But in fact could He? God calls us to look at ourselves and to admit that we are not always as righteous as we would like to believe we are. Weeds do grow in our personal paddock too!

Secondly, God's tolerance of evil is a reminder to us that He is in ultimate control of the universe, and that we are to acknowledge His sovereignty and lordship. The lesson we are to learn is that of patience and acceptance of God's timetable—not everything happens just when we want it to, and not everything that we want will happen the way we want it to. For instance, we might pray for rain, right now. But the chap on the neighbouring property might not want it for another couple of weeks. Whose prayer does God accede to? We are right or pray, verbalizing our desires to God, but we must also be patient and ready to fall in with God's timetable if it happens not to coincide with ours. And thirdly, God's willingness to tolerate the presence of evil in the world is a call to service. The presence of evil is an opportunity for us to serve God. We have the opportunity to reach out to those who are caught in the grip of evil. In the middle of their suffering and plight and guilt, we can show them that God still loves them and cares for them, through our actions. Our impetus to be the healing hands of God in a world troubled by injustice and callousness comes from the simple reality that God cares about us, and sent His Son into the world to teach us how to love and care. "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another", encouraged St John in his first Epistle. (4:11) The Church itself can be thought of as a large paddock in which the Lord has sown the good seed of holiness, but in it we must admit also spring up the weeds of sin. In its roots, its vital source of energy, the Church is essentially holy, being grounded in Christ. Through the Church, Christ is proclaimed to the world. Yet even the Church is faulty. But it is not meant to be a collection of perfect people, pious saints: it exists for sinners who want to be holy people of God, but who at times are faulty, and slip. Indeed there are some members of the Church who seem to deliberately set out to retard its mission by sowing seeds of discord and fragmentation. The Church experiences the tension of being created holy, as an instrument for Christ in the world, and at the same time suffers from the accidental or deliberate actions of some who are not faithful to their calling. But the Church remains essentially holy through its union with Christ—"We are the Body of Christ" - and through its teachings and through the Sacraments. The thing to remember is not that the Church consists of people burdened with sin, but to appreciate that even so it has a vigorous intention to do good and to promote holiness. We acknowledge that throughout history the Church has made serious mistakes and blunders and committed grave errors. No doubt these lapses will, unfortunately, continue to happen. Dwelling on such inconsistencies only produces negative attitudes—it is far more uplifting and spiritually rewarding to praise God for the way the Church

inspires faithfulness, supports the needs, comforts the distressed, promotes goodness in the community and points people towards God.

The message of the Weeds and the Wheat is fairly simple. Good and evil will be permitted to exist together until the final great harvest, when the rubbish will be destroyed and the righteous "shall shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father".

Meanwhile we are to carry on as Christ's servants as best we can, not overly worrying about the evil which is about us, though endeavouring to keep our own patch clear. We are to carry on our discipleship, no matter how shaky and flawed that discipleship might be. We are to be strong in the faith, hope and assurance that God is with us and in His world, and as His faithful disciples we are to go on working and praying for the justice and peace and righteousness which He has promised.

Amen.

Sunday between 24 & 30 July 2008

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

[Based on the Gospel appointed for today: Matthew 13:44-58]

“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”. (13:52)
With these words of Jesus, Matthew concludes a series of parables by our Lord, teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven, a series which we have had put before us these last few Sundays when the Gospel passage appointed has come from chapter 13 of St Matthew’s Gospel.

A couple of Sundays ago we heard the parable of the Sower and the various situations into which the seed, which is the Word of God, falls—the pathway, the rocky places, the thorny patch and the good soil, speaking to us of the reluctance and superficiality and preoccupation and self-centredness of people which prevents the Word of God from flourishing in their hearts. But also rejoicing in the bountiful harvest which the good soil produces. Last Sunday’s extract spoke of how weeds will also grow with the grain in the good soil. Both will be allowed to grow until the harvest, but then the weeds—those who reject Jesus’ teaching—are to be pulled out and destroyed because they are useless. Strong words from One so often spoken of as gentle and mild, full of love and forgiveness. But that is how important it is to accept and follow Him. The good seed means the sons and daughters of the Kingdom—the righteous “who will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father”. And the admonition at the end that we must get the message: “He who has ears, let him hear”.

Today we have heard three short parables: the Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure found in a field; a pearl of great value; a net containing all sorts of fish. The first two emphasize the value of the Kingdom, the desire to obtain it causing the finder to go to extreme lengths to possess it. The third goes back again to the beginning of the series with the warning that the bad and useless will be lost, just as a fisherman with his mixed catch sorts out the edible fish from the worthless. And Jesus describes the rejected as expressing their belated grief and dismay with weeping and gnashing of teeth. An old TV skit by Dave Allen had the Rev’d Ian Paisley preaching hellfire and damnation, and saying that teeth for gnashing will be provided if necessary!

We are to be like the Christian scribe, bringing out of our treasure things old and new. As the scribe drew on his pre-Christian, Old Testament training, and interpreted it in the new light of the Gospel of Christ, so we are to receive the Gospel tradition and apply it to our own times and situation. The truth is there, it is eternal, and it has to be understood not just as an old historical saying, but as effective today as when Jesus first spoke those truths.

The Kingdom does involve a cost—it is worth everything we possess. Often the most worthwhile things in life come at a high price. A university education costs not only large sums of money for fees and books and tuition, but also demands a high price in disciplined study time, squeezing out social activities and leisure. The grace of God is of course free—salvation is a gift. But to obtain it will involve for us cost in terms of worship, witness, service: it may be a costly challenge in terms of our way

of life. Yet as we begin to recognize the good news of Jesus Christ, it becomes all worthwhile. We will do all we can to possess it—any less makes us unworthy of the Kingdom.

We devote our lives to things which are to us of the highest importance. We always have time for those things which are most important to us, and we spend money on activities and causes and interests which are important to us—in extreme cases even to the detriment of vital requirements. What we spend our time and money on says much about our priorities. The time will come when our Lord will ask us about the things we have treasured in this life—what issues have demanded our time and energy and wealth. For many people that will be an uncomfortable question to answer, but not for those who have sought the pearl of great value or the treasure hidden in the field.

At our Baptism, when we were brought into the Family of God, the opportunity to grasp the great treasure, the valuable pear, was given to us. Of course most of us were infants, and the hope and expectation was, as it still is, that those baptized would grow up to claim the costly prize. Some do, many don't: we are free to reject our inheritance. The words used at the distribution of the Holy Communion are highly significant: "The Body—the Blood of Christ keep you in eternal life". We have eternal life now—it is not a situation which begins as we die. Death is about this physical body which wears out and decays and is of no further use to us. But we enter eternal life when we accept Christ as our Saviour and God as our Father. This is what St John was on about on the introduction to his Gospel" "To all who received Him, who believed in His Name, He gave power to become children of God". (1:12) He gave them, He gives us, the power—the right—to become children of the Father. But it's up to us to reach out, to ask, to accept. Yes we are, as St Paul wrote, predestined to be children of God, chosen, set apart, called, put right with Him, sharing in His glory. This is the treasure, this is the pearl. It is not "pie in the sky bye and bye when we die". It is something to look for right now. It is the ideal of our present life in Christ. This is what God is offering to us.

The Early Church for whom Matthew wrote our Lord's words was set in a society threatened by moral laxity; by teachers of all kinds of peculiar philosophies; by persecution. Not so very different from our situation today, although the persecution bit is more likely to be verbal than physical in this country—unlike in Yugoslavia and Indonesia and the Sudan.

And as the pressures are the same, so the solutions are the same. "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness". (Matthew 6:33)

How then are we to find the treasure, the pearl, the Kingdom? Simply by refusing to be satisfied with anything less than being able to rejoice in the knowledge that we are members of Christ; children of God; inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven—our Baptismal gift. Eternal life is our now—if we are willing to turn the things of this world into currency which will buy the field to obtain the treasure; to pay for the pearl of great value. Pray that in the great sorting-out we may be found worthy to have a place in the Kingdom of Heaven. **Amen.**