

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost - 27th July 2008

[Sunday between 24 and 30 July Year A]

1. **Many Christians** will tell you that they find prayer difficult, and many will admit that their prayer life is inadequate. Today's reading from the letter to the Romans (8.26-39) will give us heart. In this letter, Paul encouraged the Christians in Rome to understand that they were 'the first fruits of the Spirit', the same Spirit who will ultimately renew the whole cosmos. But, in their life in the Spirit, like us they still live in a world which is groaning and crying out for redemption. Sometimes we pray to God in almost rote fashion - 'saying our prayers' without thinking, but most of the time we want to pray but feel we don't have the words to express our needs to God. The Spirit helps us in our weakness, says Paul. The Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. God searches our heart he says, and intercedes with God according to the will of God.
2. **Now this is the mystery of prayer.** We tend to think of it as poor humans daring to speak to the transcendent God above us, begging for his attention. But Paul suggests it is the Spirit within us the immanent God, praying to the 'other' the transcendent God. "According to the will of God" is reminiscent of the line in the Lord's Prayer, 'Your will be done'. This is at the heart of all prayer, that we will want what God wants, what he wants for us and for his world, and his kingdom. The hymn 'Breathe on me, breath of God' expresses this beautifully.
3. **God's kingdom is at the heart of all our prayer.** I think we can take great comfort that our selfish prayers of "I want.." and "I need.." may be transformed by the Spirit into a desire for the kingdom, that treasure, that pearl of great price (Matthew 13.4-48), the supreme state, a state of relationship to God, where peace and justice and mercy reign, to be desired above all else.
4. **Paul's words today add further comfort.** It is not just being Pollyanna when he says everything will turn out right in the end. It was based on his experience and his belief, that if they were transformed in the image of Christ, and filled with the Spirit, then they will be glorified, not in the life to come but in this present life. In prayer, in letting ourselves be open to the Spirit within us, letting the Spirit speak through us, in that trust we can experience that glorious kingdom now.

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost - 6th July 2008

[Sunday between 3 and 9 July—Year A]

1. **Yokes are always associated with beasts of burden.** bullock drays were essential to the economy of Australia pulling loads to shipping or railheads. They are still used in Asia. We associate them with heavy burdens, harsh treatment, and limited freedom.
2. **How surprising then for Jesus to use 'yoke' as a metaphor!** (Matt 11:28-30) It's almost a contradiction to say that a yoke is easy and a burden light. Romans 7:14-25 gives a tongue-twisting explanation of the yoke of sin which we all bear. If we are yoked to sin we go where we do not want. Our path is set for us, we cannot turn because the yoke keeps us restrained. The burden of sin is heavy and it leads to wretchedness.
3. **But thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!** Paul in Romans 7:14-25 and 8:1-2 reminds us that we have been set free from the yoke of sin and death. The yoke of the Spirit offers freedom. In Matt 11:15-27 Jesus speaks confidently of his Sonship through whom the Father is revealed. His yoke is revolutionary. It is light and there will be no heavy burdens. It seems that only those whose ears are attuned to him, only the innocent, those like children, those who trust with simplicity, are able to accept confidently the 'yoke' which he offers.
4. **Being forgiven and freed from sin is a joy; Christian ministry, serving and loving others is a joy.** The joy and peace we gain from our being yoked to Jesus needs to be visible to others. It doesn't help to be whingers and complainers. Cf the Gen. 24 story: Rebekkah offered willingly and ungrudgingly to water Laban's 10 camels. (Camels drink gallons and gallons and Rebekkah had to pull the water up from the well). This yoke of service is an enigma. It is not burdensome to do good, and to serve others; it is a privilege and a joy. Christians who are yoked to Christ will be joyful, generous, willing and uncomplaining.
5. **How does this apply in your own life and in the life of the parish?** Are you a joyful Christian? What attitudes do you have about your Christian life and your ministry? Is your worship thankful, praising and joyful? Do you enjoy your service to the community or do you resent it? What kind of yoke do you wear?

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost - 13th July 2008

[Sunday between 10 and 16 July—Year A]

1. **The Church is not flourishing in the western world**, but growth of the Church in Asia, South America and Africa is amazing. We fail to attract young people and suffer many frustrations in our ministry. People don't seem to want to hear the word of God's kingdom.
2. **Probably Jesus' original parable finished at v.9** with the punch line—as an assurance of the abundant success of the kingdom despite failures and frustrations in the Church. (In those days a yield of 7½ fold was average. Jesus deliberately exaggerates—100 fold, 60 fold, 30 fold. Modern farming yields may have lessened the impact of this parable!)
3. **Maybe you have always been encouraged to apply this parable to yourself:** are you like the path, the rocky ground, thorns, good soil? This is a legitimate reading of the parable and is supported by Romans 8:1-11. Those whose minds are set on the Spirit will be fertile ground for the Word to grow and flourish.
4. **Also, we can read it as an encouragement to us as sowers.** Put yourself or your congregation in the picture as a sower of the word. How do you broadcast the Word in your community. Are you being lavish in your seeding? Where does the grain fall? Some is wasted, some is choked, some doesn't thrive, but perhaps there is some which does root and grow and bear a crop. The wasted seed is more than compensated by the crop from the seeds which fall on good soil.
5. **It is so easy to be despondent about the Church:** its failures, its scandals, its seeming lack of success by our standards. In this situation the story of Jacob's dream (Genesis 28:10-19a) is strangely encouraging to us. In another time and place, in another culture and situation, the vision of the ladder, the promise of blessings through the family, and the assurance in v.17 comforted Jacob, but if we will hear God's message to us today, we will hear him speaking to us through this story.

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost - 20th July 2008

[Sunday between 17 and 23 July Year A]

1. **Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 show God as patient and forbearing**, "Separating the wheat from the tares", is a common enough phrase. Yet this is not something for us to do. All in God's good time will judgment be made about "good" and "bad". God is patient and forbearing, slow to judge, and persistent till the end when the truth will be revealed. Patient and forbearing do not mean weak and accepting. Judgment is his prerogative.
2. **What did the parable mean for Jesus?** Jesus lived among critical people; the Pharisees regarded themselves as righteous and criticized Jesus for socializing with outcasts. Jesus knew that God would separate people at the great day of judgment. In the meantime, side by side there will be good and bad living together. For the early Christian community the parable was a reassurance that God would recognize the righteous, who need to persevere with their faith although amongst them will be people who are 'weeds', although it is not up to us to do the judgement of them
3. **The parable of the mustard seed and the yeast give encouragement.** From small beginnings the kingdom of God will triumph and encompass large numbers; the kingdom of God is hard to see, like yeast hidden in the flour, but it will do its work. Again the major point is the patience and forbearance of God, who is prepared to wait for the growth that will come in time. God is gracious and compassionate: slow to anger, full of goodness and truth" Ps. 86.15 The truth may be hidden from us now but it will be revealed at the end.
4. **It can be hard to see God at work in the world.** Where is the kingdom, the reign of God, in a world of tsunami and earthquake, famine and war, crime and hatred? In a world where success is judged by money, career, and social status.", where evil and self-seeking seem to prosper...the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" for release from the bondage of death. (Romans 8.12-25)
5. **We pray today for pure hearts and constant wills** to worship God in spirit and in truth. (Collect) Worship is all we do to give honour and worth to God; it requires from us patience and forbearance knowing that God will finally judge us. May we be the productive wheat of his field.