26th July Sermon

In this morning’s gospel reading the author of the gospel of Matthew continues his exploration of the nature of the Kingdom of God. In telling Jesus’ parables about the Kingdom he continues to use examples from the everyday experience of the people he was teaching.

The kingdom is like a mustard seed. The smallest of seeds which grows into more than a plant. A shrub which grows to the proportions of a tree that is capable of providing safe roosts for birds. As we have become more aware of birds during the quiet of lockdown we have noticed when the birds have retreated to the trees for their overnight roost. We know that as things become more difficult we can dwell secure in the love of God.

The kingdom is like yeast. A small amount when mixed with flour ensures the whole is leavened. Those of us who enjoy baking a loaf of homemade bread still marvel in how the dough rises during the proving process to make double what we started out with. May our lives be leavened with the love of God so that they become more fruitful for the Kingdom.

The kingdom is like treasure trove. Treasure that has been buried and forgotten. It is worth putting all your energy into attaining the place where it has been found. I’ve never had the inclination to become a ‘detectorist’ and go out with my metal detector. But there must be an overwhelming sense of wonder and achievement when you stumble on something valuable, like the Staffordshire hoard. Being in the kingdom of God’s love is like discovering that treasure.

The kingdom is like having a pearl of great worth. For a merchant looking for such, the elation must have been similar to that of the ‘detectorist’. I must confess I have never hankered after being the owner of any pearls, let alone one of great worth. But I know that feeling I am part of the Kingdom of God is a pearl of great worth in my life.

While preparing this sermon I was able to sit out in the garden. I became aware of the drone of aircraft on approach to Birmingham airport. It was the first time since the cessation of air travel months ago that I had noticed them going into our nearest airport. Oddly, that sound made me recollect a birthday card that I received some years ago. The picture on it was of two rather fat and ugly caterpillars eating leafs. Above them flew a beautiful butterfly. In a speech bubble above one of the caterpillars were the words, “you’ll never get me up in one of those!” The as yet unrecognised potential of the caterpillars was there to be seen in the beautiful butterfly.

The Kingdom of God is about all eternity. That includes the present. We are in the kingdom now as we respond to the love of God in our lives. We blossom and flourish as we worship God in response to his love shown to us throughout creation but especially in the life, example, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are enabled to see beyond the grubbiness of our nature to see the wonder of that to which we can aspire. We can see beyond the restrictions of the present to the hope, the realistic hope, that things can be better in the future.

I don’t know whether you have noticed, but there are subtle changes in the language being used as we have emerged from lockdown. Once there was talk about “there having to be a new normal”. More recently that has changed to “getting back to normal”. As Christians we need to say that we don’t want to go back to the old normal – if that means we go back to selfishness instead of enhanced community cohesion – if that means we go back to using more fossil fuels and further polluting God’s world – if that means we go back to meaningless busyness and have less time for reflective thought and mediation before taking action.

As Christians let us proclaim a new normal based on the concept of the Kingdom of God as a present reality. Fly a butterfly, or should that be a kite, for a society which provides shelter for the vulnerable. A society which is leavened by God’s love of everyone, everywhere. A society which looks for the treasure, the pearls, in the lives of all its members, irrespective of colour, ethnicity, creed or nationality. A society where the worth of each individual is recognised and celebrated.

If we managed a new normal like that we would come close to the aspiration of St Paul:

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, not depth, nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”