

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 26th July 2020 – 7th Sunday after Trinity

1 Kings 3.5-12; Romans 8.26-end; Matthew 13.31-33, 44-52

I wonder if you know what a piñata is? Children often know because it has become quite a party thing. A brightly coloured and interestingly shaped container of goodies, usually sweets, is hung up out of reach, and then children take turns in bashing at it with some kind of long stick, until the container breaks open and they are showered with goodies.

It's actually a Mexican custom, quite an old one, which has become popular in many countries today. Traditionally, the container would not just be a bag but something rather more robust made out of papier-mâché, paper and flour and water, and breaking it open would require quite a lot of bashing. It's not difficult to see both the fun in it and the life lessons in the game. Gaining life's goodies takes effort and persistence, but they are there for those who work for them.

The benefits of being a Christian can be similar. The piñata can be seen as a picture of people's spiritual struggles. The goodies are there; they are essentially free; but often there are obstacles in ourselves to overcome, obstacles of sin, and we kind of do battle with them, and with God's help overcome them. Traditionally the basher is blindfolded, which seems apt.

And then the piñata breaks open and you are showered with God's good gifts. Our readings this morning are bit like that. They don't take much bashing, indeed the bashing isn't really an appropriate Christian metaphor at all, but our readings today are indeed a kind of shower of spiritual goodies. They are about the character of the Kingdom of God into which we are being invited and drawn.

So St Paul writes about the Holy Spirit aiding our weakness and our prayers; we do not enter the Kingdom of God in our own strength. God is for us, not against us, and nothing can separate us from his love in Jesus Christ, whatever challenges we face. He has called each one of us in person, and all we need to do is remain faithful, open to the grace of God, and ready to work with his Holy Spirit.

Then in the Gospel reading we have some of the most vivid images of the Kingdom of God in the Bible. The Kingdom is something that starts small and then grows into something that affects everything; the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast. It is something so wonderful that it is worth giving up all your other wealth to gain; the parables of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great value.

The Kingdom is something to which all are invited, but you have to learn to have the right spirit, to get with its character. Otherwise you will find yourself deeply frustrated and somehow outside kingdom, perhaps bashing away at it trying to get in; hence the weeping and gnashing of teeth. The goodies of the Kingdom of God are free, but we have to learn to enter the true spirit of God's Kingdom.

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All this is hugely encouraging and optimistic. If God is for us, who is against us? Our spiritual journeys are surrounded by the love of God on every side. The benefits of the Kingdom are amply worth all the worldly things that we forgo. And as we learn to be part of God's kingdom now in this life, we will find that it is life changing in astonishing ways.

As we face our particular challenges as a church at this time, needing to raise considerable funds to secure our future as a choral church, a church with the development of young people at its heart and in its heart; it is good to remember that we are in God's hands, and being shaped by his Kingdom and his Holy Spirit.

Piñatas are traditionally made in a 3D shape of a star with cones sticking out in all directions, and the Roman Catholic Church in Mexico developed the idea of the cones specifically as signs of sins that needed to be overcome. If you look up piñata on Wikipedia you'll see an image of a statue of a Franciscan friar bashing away at a piñata. That's a bit of an unfortunate image really. It is not the Christian way to bash ourselves into shape for the kingdom. The bashing is all a bit medieval.

For Christians, breaking open the piñata of gospel goodies is far more about learning to love one's neighbour as oneself, and learning to accept the grace of God, and learning to work with the Holy Spirit. But the obstacles in ourselves are nevertheless often all too real. Similarly we could think about the obstacles we need to overcome as a church in order to secure our future as a church with an all-age, cathedral style, choral ministry at its heart.

What might these obstacles be? Perhaps lack of vision, perhaps complacency, perhaps despair, perhaps lack of trust in God. Perhaps mistrust of one another, perhaps disunity. Bashing is not a good image to dwell on, and we certainly don't want to be thinking of bashing one another, but in the grace of God and in the Spirit, such spiritual obstacles do need to be overcome. The choral mission and ministry of our church is very much of the Kingdom; think again of all those gospel parables we have heard today: the mustard seed, the yeast, the treasure, the pearl of great price, the net. They all resonate.

In the end, by whatever good means, the call of the Church is to enable people to access the goodies of the Kingdom of God which are so much more than actually we ever expect or deserve. There are challenges to overcome, and there may be more difficulties ahead, but if God is for us, who can be against us? What each of us needs to do is play our parts faithfully, God will himself make up for what we lack, and whatever happens, nothing will ever separate us from his love, and the gospel goodies will shower upon us. Amen.

CJ. 26.07.20