

I have found it something of a relief to reach this Sunday and its gospel after what the Lectionary has been setting us recently. I have felt a certain doom-laden quality in the gospels of the last fortnight, as they have put before us stark oppositions between good and bad and have incited an uncomfortableness about things going wrong. Seed sown on different kinds of ground. All well and good with the receptive soil into which the seed of God's word can send down deep roots, and bear abundant fruit, but what about the stony or thistly ground – and the people represented thereby? Weeds growing in wheat, eventually to be weeded out of the Son of Man's kingdom and thrown into the furnace of fire where men will weep and gnash their teeth. And again last week – twice last week in fact – those inedible fish which get chucked away. Doomy, threatening, uncomfortable.

We've been blessed with sermons that have offered interpretations tending to dispel the sense of doom conveyed by these parables. But for the very many who haven't heard such sermons and whose notions of the Christian faith are perhaps a little underthought, these passages from Matthew may well have contributed to a regrettable understanding of Christianity as a religion of guilt and anxiety, oppressive and restrictive, dealing in the frustration of legitimate desires – a sense evident in the text that adorned the atheist buses a few years back (remember them?). 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.' As if Christianity is not about human flourishing and deep peace and joy *in this life*.

But you don't have to be a new atheist to think Christianity is a killjoy. I have a couple of friends (who would, I think, call themselves agnostics) who are rather severe on the joylessness of Christianity and they have kindly agreed to let us hear them talk the matter over together.

DUD: Course you know actually, Pete, I wish I'd never been told about God at all 'cause it means we can't get away with nothing, doesn't it? I mean you've been told about Him, you know He's there, or you think He's there, and you can't really mess about then, can you?

PETE: You can't, Dud, no.

DOUG: No, and what about the people who haven't been told about God?

PETE: Well, I asked the Reverend Stephens this, and he said that if you haven't been told about God, Dud, you're laughing. If you don't know good from evil then you're away. You can do anything you bloody well like. There's these people in New Guinea for example. They wander about with nothing on and they commit adultery, steal, and covet their neighbour's wife, which everyone wants to do. As there are no vicars about to tell them everything, they can't be got at, so they go up to heaven whatever they do. This means all these Guineans are getting up to heaven, and perfectly decent blokes like you and me who have never even committed adultery, we can't get up there. We're being kept out by these Guineans.

DUD: You see in that case, Pete, it'd be a crime to tell people about God.

PETE: I've never told anyone about God.

DUD: I haven't told anyone, I haven't mentioned it to a soul, Pete.

PETE: St Paul's got a bloody lot to answer for.

DUD: He started it didn't he – all those letters he wrote.

PETE: To the Ephiscans

DUD: You know, 'Dear Ephiscans, Stop enjoying yourself. God's about the place. Signed Paul.'

PETE: You can just imagine it, can't you. There's a nice Ephiscan family settling down to a good breakfast of fried mussels and hot coffee and just sitting there. It's a lovely day outside and they're thinking of taking the children out for a picnic by the sea and everything's happy and the sun's coming through the trees, birds are chirping away.

DUD: The distant cry of happy children, and clouds scudding across the sky.

PETE: In fact, an idyllic scene is what you'd call it, an idyllic scene. When suddenly into the midst of it all – tap, tap, on the bloody door. You know who it is?

DUD: No, Pete, who is it?

PETE: It's a messenger bearing a letter from Paul.

DUD: Dad runs to the door to open it, thinking it may be good news.

PETE: Perhaps Grandfather's died and left them the vineyards.

DUD: They open it up and what do they discover?

PETE: 'Dear George and Deirdre and Family. Stop having a good time, resign yourself to not having a picnic, cover yourself with ashes and start flaying yourselves, until further notice. Signed Paul.'

DUD: A dreadful sort of letter to get, isn't it?

PETE: Terrible.

A dreadful sort of letter indeed. Thank you, Dud and Pete.

But if Paul has a lot to answer for, then so perhaps has Matthew. Joanna suggested in her Thursday sermon that Matthew brought to his portrayal of Jesus his anger and frustration at he, Matthew, and his community of Jewish Christians being cold-shouldered by Jews who didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah. This anger and frustration may explain why six of the seven New Testament references to weeping and gnashing of teeth are found in Matthew and the phrase 'outer darkness' into which people get thrown is exclusive to him among the Biblical writers.

But Matthew also gives us today's gospel, where the uncomfortableness of the stark oppositions of good to bad in those parables gives way to the reassurance of a narrative in which all is good and a message is brought to us about the nature of God and Jesus and our faith which is wholly joyous. Anything but 'a dreadful sort of letter.' It's a wonderful message. This is not 'resign yourself to not having a picnic, cover yourselves with ashes, start flaying yourselves.' This is rather 'let go your anxiety about not getting a decent meal, enjoy your picnic by the seaside, sit down, relax, listen to the birdsong, look at the pink light on the scudding clouds, enjoy the fact that your sick have been healed, no moral qualification questions asked, enjoy this quality time with your family; enjoy being with your neighbours, enjoy experiencing this miracle, abundance brought out of the scarcity of what you were able to offer, enjoy the assurance behind this miracle that with Jesus *all* your hungers are satisfied.'

And *all* – no one excluded - ate and were filled.

Here is the God who supplies us with enough, rather than condemning our spiritual poverty. Here is the God whose grace is always great enough – great enough to cover and more than

cover our inadequacies and deficits. Here is the God who works with what little we can offer him (five loaves, two fishes; our limited capacities) and makes it more than enough for great and wondrous accomplishment. They took up twelve baskets of left-overs, indicating that God will always have enough for the twelve tribes of Israel, and indeed for all his people, indicating that there will never be an under-supply for the people of God because of God's super-abundant grace. This event is for us now, whatever Matthew meant, a foreshadowing of the Eucharist, the meal which commemorates the full, perfect and *sufficient* sacrifice made by Jesus on the Cross, the meal in which God in virtue of that once-for-all sacrifice willingly supplies our lack of power of ourselves sufficiently to help ourselves by offering himself, the all-sufficient, for our consumption and our nourishment.

Now, you may feel this is a little too rhapsodic for our current circumstances. Look, you may say, lack is what our Covid situation is all about. We can't be physically close to people in general in the way back in February we could when that proximity was part of the way we interacted with one another to our mutual profit. We can't go uninhibitedly where we want to go, and where we go, we go too often without a sense of complete security. We lack the capacity to be carefree and to relax and be at ease. We lack clarity about the future, we lack that sense of control of our lives some of us thought we as a nation had taken back. We live now with significant scarcity. We live without the capacity to mark the significant events of our lives with proper rituals; we live without the capacity to gather together in church, we live without the ability to receive the body and blood of Christ.

All those withouts. And yet....

Look at how the deficit Christ experiences in our gospel passage is satisfied. He is trying to find a time of quiet and the crowds head him off. His search for solitude and stillness is exchanged for the busyness of healing the sick and feeding the hungry. But then after he sends the satisfied crowds home, Jesus gets his time of prayer. His sacrifice for the sake of others is honoured by God. That's how it is with the Cross. Jesus' sense of ultimate lack, 'My God my God, why have you forsaken me' is met with his resurrection and his ascension, bearing scars that are glorious, his return home to the Father, his restoration to what he set aside when he emptied himself for our sake.

Our Covid lacks are in large measure generated by our consent to a self-sacrificial effort to save others. Of course this will be honoured by God. Our lacks, provided we are prepared to open ourselves to the process, - our lacks will be more than compensated by new insights, refreshed love, deepened gratitude for our being in this world of rich experience, deepened gratitude for the prospect of a world of complete fulfilment to come.

And even now, though we cannot consume the eucharistic elements we do find ourselves nourished by Christ's sacramental presence in the consecrated bread and wine.

This is the crux of the matter. We worship a God who is always present with us and always cares for us. The Lord is our shepherd, therefore *can* we lack nothing. The Lord spreads a table before *us* just as he fed the multitudes. *Our* cup shall be full, *is* full. *Our* thirst shall be slaked, *is* slaked. We have the bread we need because we have God with us, a God of mercy and loving kindness who, even in judgement, seeks only our good.

Dud and Pete cast aspersions on Paul and I (or was it Joanna?) cast them on Matthew. But Paul and Matthew shall have the last words, words bringing peace and joy to the depths of our hearts, deeper than all our distress, our anxieties, our frustrations, our feelings of loss and of lack. Paul in *Romans*: 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. And the last words of Matthew's gospel have Jesus saying, 'And remember, I am with you always, to end of the age.'

Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.