

**I pray that I may speak in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen**

Our understanding of what is Reality has certainly been deepened by our experience of the pandemic. The world of virtual reality had previously been the realm of Simulators for training pilots and those who like computer games but we and even some of our very elderly friends and family have learnt to embrace the new online reality of being church whilst hoping that we may be able to have the privilege of meeting face to face in the not too distant future.

Our Old Testament reading tells of the dream that young King Solomon had at Gibeon where God tells him he can ask for anything. Solomon was about 20 years old when he succeeded his father David as king of Israel and this meeting with God was perhaps a way of finding out whether Solomon was more interested in a material or spiritual reality.

Because Solomon asks for Wisdom, God grants him wisdom and all the other things that he could have asked for but didn't. I wonder what we ask for in our prayers, what is that we consider important?. Of course today we see the wisdom of God as just one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit but do we really seek those spiritual gifts, are they more important than our material hopes?

Our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans follows directly on from last week so when Paul writes "Likewise" he is saying just as Hope sustains him in suffering so the Holy Spirit sustains him in prayer.

The relationship of the Holy Spirit and God the Father is so close that prayers need not be audible. God knows our every thought so the Spirit is able to intercede for us in accordance with God's will.

The question of an all knowing and all powerful God giving us free will has challenged the thinking of all the great theologians over the centuries from Paul to St Augustine, from Origen to Calvin and more recently John Dunn and Tom

Wright. But I don't want us to get hung up on the sorts of ideas these people have had about what is called predestination.

Paul, paradoxically assumes that God predestines humans to a certain fate as he knows what we will do and that we are responsible for that fate through our free will. The essential point is that despite all appearances to the contrary God has everything in control, which is why Paul is able to say “All things work together for good”. This is not a promise that only good things will happen to those that love God, but, that in the context of the time when the churches were suffering and being persecuted, these things will not thwart God, who is able to use even such terrible situations to accomplish his divine purpose.

Paul also talks about justification. Here I think he has two ideas in mind: that God credits believers with the status of righteousness through their faith and that God empowers believers to live righteously, both of which are amazing acts of grace. It is God's will that believers “be conformed to the image of his son” so we can look forward to the time when we become one large family in the Kingdom of God. This echoes back to the creation account of Gen 1 inviting us to believe that we already share the character of Christ, as we were all made in his image.

The whole of Romans chapters 1-8 reaches its climax in verses 31-39. Last week we heard about the comparison that Paul made between his present tribulations and the future glory which was his hope and this week we get to see a similar comparison between our earthly situation and the spiritual reality. For every believer, the one true indicator of their real position is the unconditional love that God demonstrated in the cross of Christ.

Paul makes this all the more poignant by borrowing the language of the binding of Isaac from Gen 22 “You have not withheld your son, your only son”: God makes the sacrifice that even Abraham was spared. So with this as a datum the “everything else” in v 32 is assured. No one can condemn us because Christ died

for us, he is alive and sits in the place of power at the right hand of God the father and he is interceding for us. So no kind of deprivation, no power of sovereignty, no physical distance can separate us from the greater reality of the love that God has for us. “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us”. This is Paul’s glorious vision of his reality and hope sitting side by side.

But what about our present reality and the hope that we have in Christ? Last week Michael talked about relevance of the parable of the wheat and the tares and this week we get to explore the other parables in Matthew Chapter 13: the mustard seed and the yeast, the finding of treasure and the priceless pearl and the dealing with the catch of fish.

In each of these, Jesus is trying to give us a glimpse into the reality of the Kingdom of God. The parable of the great catch of fish is like the parable that Michael explored last week which spoke of the sorting and sifting of good and bad that will inevitably have to happen.

The parable of the mustard seed, proverbially a very small seed, shows that a humble beginning is not inconsistent with a great and glorious destiny. It illustrates and contrasts the experience of Jesus and his disciples and their expectations of the future. It too sets reality and hope side by side. The yeast that causes the dough to rise may be inconspicuously present like the mustard seed in the ground can be compared with what we say and do which may have great significance in the Kingdom of God.

The emphasis of the parables of the treasure and the pearl is different in that the Kingdom of God is not a visible reality, but it can be found and we must be prepared to give all that we have for it. If we try to count the cost of discipleship then we probably have failed to grasp its real value.

Jesus clearly wants his disciples to understand the reality of the kingdom and to be able share this with others. Let’s pray we can do the same.

Amen. [1104]