

PENTECOST 8A 26-07-2020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Genesis 29.15-28; Ps 105.1-11; Romans 8.26-39;

*Matthew 13.44-58*

*'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 'Have you understood all this?' They answered, 'Yes.' And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.' When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place. He came to his home town and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?' And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house.' And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.*

What an interesting selection of readings we have today! First we heard about Jacob being tricked into marrying the wrong sister by his sneaky father-in-law; Jacob must have been very drunk by the time he staggered into the tent on his wedding night, because he didn't realise he was in bed with the wrong girl until it was morning!

Jacob married his sweetheart Rachel, which probably didn't please poor Leah very much; and he also had their 'maids' as concubines. He ended up with thirteen children: twelve sons and one daughter. Psalm 105 tells us that Jacob's children are God's chosen ones.

The Patriarchs considered polygamy perfectly acceptable, and the best way to ensure you had plenty of sons to carry on the family. Daughters weren't worth much, because women were only there to serve men and bear children.

So if anybody tries to argue that they support the 'Biblical' view of marriage- and that's usually because they are objecting to same-sex marriage- the logical response is:

'Which Biblical view? The view that supports polygamy, or the one that supports death by stoning for adultery, or the one that expects a childless widow to marry her brother-in-law, or the one that says it's preferable to marry than burn with lust but you'd be better off staying single?'

Because the Bible is a collection of different kinds of literature written over a very long period of time, it shows us different viewpoints and understandings of God and how God relates to us. From the earliest scriptures to those written most recently we can see development of thought and changes in attitude to God and other people.

So the Bible does not have one, consistent, strong teaching or opinion about many issues- including marriage. And many other situations that present us with ethical dilemmas today are simply not addressed by scripture because they didn't exist for the writers.

That is one reason why the Anglican Church rests on the three pillars of Scripture, Tradition and Reason. Each informs the other and helps us to wrestle with contemporary situations.

The reading from Romans is helpful, reminding us that the Spirit helps us in our weakness and prays with and through us.

When we don't know how to pray, or what to pray for, or how to get through things we don't understand- God's Spirit is in us to say what we can't say, with sighs too deep for words.

We can trust God because, as Paul says, nothing can separate us from God's love. Nothing at all.

The Gospel reading set for today contains three parables, a description of a well-trained scribe, and the story of Jesus being rejected in his home town. Bit of a mish-mash that doesn't seem very connected.

In the overall scheme of Matthew's gospel, the writer has grouped a number of parables together and then moves the action on through Nazareth, past the death of John the Baptist, and on to Jesus performing various miracles. Today we heard the last in this group of parables about the kingdom of heaven and come to the town where Jesus grew up.

Jesus did his usual thing and began to teach the people, but this time they didn't like it and they took offense at him. They weren't impressed by the wisdom of the parables; they didn't believe he could heal people. They saw him as Mary's boy, the scruffy kid who ran around with their scruffy kids.

They'd known him as a spotty teenager- he wasn't anything special, so who did he think he was, coming back and thinking he could teach THEM anything?

This is small-town thinking at its worst: 'he thinks he's something special but we know he isn't'. Jesus didn't seem surprised, and acknowledged that prophets don't get respect in their own homes. And then he moved on.

So what can we learn from this collection of scriptures today? I suggest there are at least three things.

One: don't be fooled into thinking that the Bible only presents one way of looking at things, because chances are you'll be mistaken. There is danger in taking what you read too literally, and in reading small chunks in isolation from the rest.

Two: No matter how tough things are for us- as an individual, a parish, a country, in this Covid-19 world- nothing can separate us from God's love, and the Spirit is always there to help us.

Three: Don't dismiss people just because you think you know them. You don't know how God has been working in them.

After this service we are going to hold our annual meeting, which will include electing office-bearers. Some of the nominees you may have known for years: some you might not know well at all.

They have offered themselves to serve you and the church. They need our prayer and support as they look after different aspects of the functioning of this community.

We are all the church: remember, the church is not a building, it's a people. We need leaders, people who will get things done, motivate the rest of us, and make decisions on our behalf. They need our help because we are all in this together.

Jesus was criticised by his own people, who refused to recognise him, so he did the only thing he could do- he left, and moved on to where people would listen. Let us be determined to be people who listen to Jesus: let's be people who honour and respect one another, because that's the way Jesus leads us.

The Lord be with you.