

## Session One:

Three passages to help us listen to God

**Matthew 13** is a chapter of parables. Two are little gems: the treasure in the field and the pearl of exceptional value. In both of them, the discoverer sells everything in order to buy the rights to it. These are stories for the disciples of Jesus, people of God, among whom we are all included, no matter how wealthy or not, how well-qualified or not, how humble or how exalted we may foolishly imagine ourselves to be.

The reign of the Heavenly One – the kingdom of God – once discovered, is worth all the world; indeed, it's only when you discover that it isn't just worth more than *anything* but it's worth more than *everything*, you begin to know the meaning of what Jesus is saying. So simple! A priceless pearl and a buried treasure. Too simple by half, perhaps. "Have you understood this?" asks Jesus. By implication the disciples say, "Of course we have, Master; do you take us for fools?" Well, try this, then: *Jesus said, "When, therefore, a teacher of the law becomes a learner in the kingdom of Heaven, he is like a house-holder who can produce from his store things new and old."* (Matthew 13. 52)

The Revised English Bible, the most fluent of the modern English versions, puts the verse well: when a teacher of the law becomes a learner in the kingdom, when the clergy (including bishops) recognise that they, too, are disciples, they, too, are laity, people of God, then they find that the greatest treasure of all belongs to them.

Teachers who become learners acquire a treasure chest which has in it for us to pull out what Jesus calls "the old", the inheritance, the tradition, that which has been faithfully handed on from one to another over the years. This is deeply rooted in the Old Testament, as, for instance:

*"... things that we have heard and know, things our forefathers have recounted to us ... which he commanded our forefathers to teach their descendants, so that it might be known to a future generation, to children yet to be born, and they, in turn would repeat it to their children.*  
(Psalm 78. 3, 6)

This well-aged treasure is the rich inheritance of the Scriptures, the Bible; it's our own people's story; it's our history. (Sadly, Christians today in the wealthy lands of the world are, for the most part, barely semi-literate in the Bible.) Of course, anyone who takes "the old" seriously will find him/herself challenged by it because the more you know, the more you find your prejudices begin to unravel. A sense of being part of something unbroken by time, particularly, from the Christian point of view, of being part of the Church founded not 2,000 years ago at Pentecost but inaugurated by covenant with wandering Abraham, gives depth to the picture of faith. Without these perspectives, without bringing out "the old" from our

treasure, without giving real priority to the Bible as we read it with reason in the light of a living tradition, and without recalling our own story, we will know everything about the world and the present moment - 'homo-up-to-datum' in Daniel Boorstin's words - but we will lose our spiritual and moral bearings and mislead others. In Winston Churchill's words, "The further backwards we look, the further forwards we can see."

Now from that treasure chest also comes "the new", the immediate, the local, the Manx, that which stares us in the face every day, including our lives as they have unfolded this week. Look at the way the Apostle Paul saw what was going on in Athenian religion and immediately harnessed it to the cause of the gospel:

*Men of Athens, I see that in everything that concerns religion you are uncommonly scrupulous. As I was going round looking at the objects of your worship, I noticed among other things an altar bearing the inscription 'To an Unknown God'. What you worship but do not know – this is what I now proclaim. (Acts 17. 22, 23)*

A failure to understand and use "the new" leaves us with a faith that's a museum-piece from an archaeological dig, an irrelevance, a faith rightly rejected as absurd by our contemporaries. Some church-goers today have the curious notion that all you have to do is what you did 50 years ago but louder and everyone will come flocking back to church. That thinking is off with the fairies! People will no more do that than accept old Aunt Mabel's invitation to go para-gliding.

If ever there is a lesson for the Church today it is this: value both the old and the new as gifts from the treasure of God's kingdom. Not either: both.

According to **John 15**, Jesus says, "I am the true vine." This saying, from the Gospel of John, is the final "I am" saying in that Gospel. "I am" (the word means "I exist in my own right, I'm not a creature") is in itself a powerful claim by Jesus to be unique, divine and Lord. But when Jesus says, "I am the vine," he's not likening himself to bread, or a shepherd or a gate but to the image used by God's ancient people, the Jews, to describe *themselves*: the vine, the planted and pruned vine of a nation. He's making a bold claim to be the real embodiment of the people of God.

The vine produces grapes, and grapes are made into wine by being squeezed, squashed, pressed together, strained and left to ferment - wine that can't fail also to remind us of parties, celebrations and the Lord's Supper, the Christian Eucharist. The Apostle Paul reminds us that just as the bread we break and share in Holy Communion starts off as "one loaf" [1 Corinthians 10. 17] and is broken into many differently-shaped pieces, and that those broken and unique pieces of bread remind us of the differently-shaped pieces of all who make up the Church, the body of Christ; so the cup from which we drink is made from grapes trodden together, squashed processed and fermented, like we are in life, drawn from a single

vat and shared between us. The sip I take is indistinguishable from the sip you take: we “dwell / remain” in Christ and he “dwells in us”. Again and again in this passage, John brings us back to that verb to “abide / dwell” [*meno*] in Jesus and in his love. Let the sap of the vine, the life of Jesus, flow through us, through his disciples. When his life ceases to flow through us, faith dies, worship becomes a formality, branches of the vine wither and dry up. But when the life-giving sap of Christ flows through the vine, the church bears fruit, fruit that will last.

So what is this ‘fruit’ that the Church should be producing? It’s not easy to get at what Jesus is saying. Imagine walking around a garden asking questions. What’s that tree for? It’s beautiful, there’s a swing hanging from it and it gives good shade. What’s that dahlia for? It’s bright and cheerful and the bees love it. What’s that weed for? A weed is a plant in the wrong place so I’ll pull it up. What’s that vine for? For grapes to eat or turn into wine. So when Jesus makes comments about bearing fruit, he’s really forcing you to ask: ‘What on earth is the Church for?’ The simple answer lies in the two unconditional priorities for all three Abrahamic faiths: God and people – “Love God, love your neighbour”. Unquestionably, the Church’s priorities lie outside her walls. An introverted church is a sham, not a church at all, because it doesn’t attempt to live up to God’s priorities. A church that’s bothered about itself – about the needs of its congregation, about its buildings, about its petty squabbles, even about its own salvation – is preaching a badly distorted un-gospel. A church which is introverted, that’s bothered about itself, is no church at all.

Unfortunately, it is still true in many places that what’s on the Church label is not what’s in the tin! Young people look at us and are disillusioned. They say, “This group of people say they believe in God, they trust in Christ, they’re filled with his Spirit and they are committed to love in action. But if we ask them about God, they get embarrassed and invite us to Evensong. When we ask what the church has done to improve the community, the answers are often about providing entertainment.” On the label it’s says, “Open here for salvation, wholeness and purpose” but that’s not what seems to be inside! How did we get into this state? Too much time and energy finding their way into keeping the church going and keeping its members happy: it’s ecclesiastical introversion.

What might be the Church's seven last words? "We've never done it that way before." The gospel – Good News worth telling – becomes “Come and get it if you want it but on our terms”. That’s off-putting, unattractive, it’s the picture of a church that young people keep clear of – and none of us can blame them. Young people are forcing us to think and act on global issues: the environment, population-growth, international justice, fair trade, hunger, human trafficking, poverty, issues bigger and, dare I say it, more important than the ones that occupy our minds much of our time. Thank God for the vital contribution of young people.

Jesus tells us to “dwell” in his love. Most clergy were trained as individuals, we spent our

formative years looking forward to what we called “our own parish”; naturally, we believe all the right stuff about collaboration but we find it difficult to play as a real team, mainly because we find it difficult to handle failure and success with equal grace. Readers are not like that at all, are they? I wonder ...

Cricket is not my sport but I know enough to appreciate that, whether you are caught out for a duck or you make a century, it’s the final score - the *team* score - that counts. Clergy, churchwardens, readers, other lay ministers and officers – need constantly to remind ourselves that we play as a team, or, to put it in the infinitely more powerful words of Jesus, that we dwell in his love. The tell-tale signs of failing to dwell in the love of Christ are when people talk about “*my* parish, *my* church, *my* ministry, *my* communion, *my* service” and so on. That’s not the language of those who know they live in the true Vine, of people who belong to one another root-and-branch, who drink from the same cup of wine.

The third reflection is about **a New Testament word**.

What do you think is the picture many people have about God? He’s far away? Shrouded in mystery? Untouched by human/real life? Apparently ignorant (or unwilling to do anything about) the state of the world, the tragedy of Haiti, the pain of an individual? Like a Christian god on Mount Olympus? A God of holy sanctuaries, pious prayers, hushed voices and bowed heads? A God for whom holiness is everything?

Or the God of the home, of industry, fishing, tourism, unemployment, family joys and family break-ups, human squabbles, hunger, sickness, terror, war, poverty, commerce; in fact the God of all of creation’s riches and agonies? The God who came to our level and became one of us, yet still remains holy? The God of the manger, cross and empty tomb? The God made known to us uniquely in Jesus Christ?

Of course, he’s that God, God who sent his Son to “get stuck in”, turned up in a stable, rolled up his sleeves in a carpenter’s shop, gave his back to the lash and his wrists to the nails, opened his heart to Magdalene. Because he is this God, the involved God, the God who pitched his divine tent [*tabernacled*] among people like us, he expects the people called by his Son’s name (Christians) also to “get stuck in”, to do his work, to be the people who bring living water to a world thirsty for love.

But he doesn’t expect us to do this all ourselves, to be lonely little missionaries struggling to share God’s love all alone. He gives us helpers: one another, and a very special Helper. John 14. 15-17.

This is part of a long conversation in John’s Gospel which takes place not long before Jesus is betrayed and arrested: it’s where Matthew, Mark & Luke put Last Supper. Jesus says he’s going away and he will return, to “pass over” from death to life in the greatest Passover of all.

He promises something very special which will be given to them, the unique gift from the Father, the Holy Spirit. (Jesus says this on a number of occasions, eg. 16. 7.)

And John uses a special name for the Holy Spirit: what does he say? “The Father ... will give you another to be your advocate / comforter / counsellor / helper / encourager / convincer / someone to stand up for you”. Why on earth can’t we translate that - the “paraclete”? *[Footnote]* The meaning of the word is simple: “para” as in “parallel” = “alongside” and “clete” from verb “to call”. So, a paraclete is “someone called to your side”, rather like a chaplain gets called to the side of a bishop!

This word was used to describe four kinds of people in the world of the New Testament:

1. *In the Greek translation of the O.T.*, someone called on to bring consolation / to help a person pass breaking-point without breaking – the comforter. “Comforter” means more than a nice person: s/he’s a “fortifier” (*Phillosan* ‘fortifies the over-40’s?’). Bishop Odo (half-brother to William the Conqueror) in the Bayeux Tapestry of Battle of Hastings, with a club in hand (bishops were forbidden to carry swords) is seen behind the Norman troops: “Hic Odo Episcopus baculum tenens confortat pueros” *[Here Bishop Odo, holding a club, comforts the lads]*.
2. *In a court of law*, the paraclete was a prisoner’s friend / character witness / adviser / counsel for the defence – the counsellor / advocate.
3. *Someone called on to help another person in need*, to render some service / act of kindness – the helper.
4. *And in oratory*, a person who urges us on to noble thoughts and actions / inspires soldiers into battle:

“... The game’s afoot:

Follow your spirit; and upon this charge

Cry ‘God for Harry, England, and Saint George!’ ”

*[William Shakespeare: King Henry V, III. i. 32-34]*

The inspiring presence and power of the risen Christ – the encourager.

This Holy Spirit is ours for the asking. Jesus is not physically present with us in his human body, though he is present with us in one another and, in particular, at the Eucharist. But we’re often alone and then there’s no one to turn to; however regularly we may celebrate the Eucharist, the memory fades. Not so the availability of the Holy Spirit: we can call on him any time, any day, any place and he will bring the Lord Jesus to our side. More than that, you “receive him”, you take him in to yourself, “you know him, he lives with you and will be inside you”.

So how does this happen? It's all there: "If you love me," says Jesus, "you will obey my commands / keep to my orders and I'll ask the Father to give you ...the Spirit of truth to be with you for ever."

This is not just a nice thing to have, a must-have accessory for every good Anglican; the Spirit is given to enable you to carry on the work of Jesus with him inside you. He is given so that you can "get stuck in" like he got stuck in – in your work / job centre / post office / family arguments / politics / all the messiness and pleasure of our lives and the world. He calls us to get stuck in and make a difference for the better.

If the point of the Church is God and people – and I can't see any other point – then our calling is to worship God and love people. For that, we need Jesus and the Spirit brings him right alongside, inside - "we dwell in him and he in us". All we have to do is love the Lord, keep his commands and let his Spirit get to work in us.

**Note:** *In the Qur'an [Sura 61. 6] some Muslims claim there is a reference to John's use of "paracletos" (etc.) and that it is a textual error for "periclytos", meaning "praised". Since "Ahmad", one of Mohammad's names, means "praised" they see a prophecy of their Prophet. In fact, there is not a single manuscript which uses "periclytos" for "paracletos"; furthermore, the word does not appear in the New Testament.*

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