

Sunday 27 July 2008: Tenth Sunday after Trinity

The kingdom of heaven is all around us

Readings: Romans 8. 26-39; Matthew 13. 31-33, 44-52

Good morning. I bring you greetings from Episcopalians in the United States and Taiwan, Nicaragua, Honduras, Ecuador, Columbia, Venezuela, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, - both the British and US - and a grouping of churches in Europe.

It has been a joy to be in this country for the last two and a half weeks. Two weeks ago I was in Salisbury, where we were celebrating the 750th anniversary of their *new* cathedral. Part of that celebration involved a pilgrimage – a couple of miles' walk from the ruins of the old cathedral, which has been excavated only in the last few decades, and we walked down into the town that has grown up around the new one. While I was there, the dean drove us past Stonehenge, where archaeologists continue to discover intriguing things about what life in this land was like three and four millennia ago.

The burials that have been excavated are informative, both because of what scientists can learn from those bones, but even more so because of what is buried with the dead – implements of daily life, jewels, weapons – all that variety of items that are hidden in graves to protect, to ward and guide the dead on their next journey. In spite of looters, the treasures hidden in graves like those are valuable for what they teach us about the living.

I have found all sorts of fascinating things in other fields, in the Western US. I've found old crockery in a field around a house we lived in, in Oregon – left by settlers in the late 1800s. I've found Native American arrowheads exposed in other fields in Eastern Oregon. In the last 10 days while we've been in Canterbury, I've run past the Church of Sts Cosmus and Damian in the Blean repeatedly and wondered about what is hidden in the moat and the fields round that ancient church. The days that the bishops spent in Canterbury Cathedral gave abundant evidence of the treasured bones buried in the earth and above it in that sacred place. Thomas Becket's shrine there is a treasure of yet another sort.

What has St Martin's found by digging in this field? Your excavation right next door says something about the treasure to be found among the poor and the homeless, and the blessing that Jesus pronounced on the poor. The kingdom of heaven is indeed like the treasure hidden in the field, a treasure that you have gone and sold all you had – or convinced many donors to part with – in order to buy it.

Jesus' parables this morning are so familiar that we've lost the sense of surprise and shock that their first hearers would have had. The kingdom of heaven is like a small seed that grows large and shelters the birds – the early Christians would have heard that speaking about Gentiles. This place and its work also shelter the unlikely and unnoticed and, sometimes despised, outsider.

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that leavens everything around it. That would have been intensely shocking to Jesus' hearers, for it compares God's presence to something unclean that contaminates everything it touches. How would Jesus say it here? Maybe that the kingdom of heaven is like the odour of unwashed bodies, finding shelter at last in a well-heated room.

The kingdom of heaven is like finding something unexpected in a field, and selling all you

have got in order to buy it. The kingdom of heaven is like searching the earth for a great treasure, and then giving all you have in order to own it. We can find that valuable thing accidentally or by diligent searching, but it will take all we have to possess it. It might be like letting your mission drive the use of these buildings, and the sacrificial giving that makes such remarkable work possible.

And finally, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a net full of fish. At the end of time, those fish will be sorted into useful ones and trash fish – but not until then. The strong suggestion that, even if some smell better than others, it is not given to us to know which is which, and until the end of things we might cultivate a perception that sees pearls of great price in all the oysters around us.

The kingdom of heaven is all around us, and among us, in unsuspected places, in places where we might think to find it if we look hard enough, and growing in ways we may find distasteful or surprising. A couple of nights ago, a group of young people moved into the next dormitory on the campus of the University of Kent. They were partying quite energetically when I went to bed. The noise woke me up at a quarter to three, and the loud screams and laughter continued after 5am. And I think Jesus would say the kingdom of heaven is like that, for their mirth and delight said a great deal about joy and peace, even if I had a hard time joining in.

In the last days, I've seen evidence of the kingdom of heaven among bishops who agree and disagree about the hot-button issues, bishops who speak different languages, and among bishops who come from vastly different contexts. One bishop in Madagascar has told of a diocese that is devastated every year by cyclones, sometimes several times – yet he continues his work to rebuild. He holds a vision of a cathedral and churches that will be shelters from the storm, both literally and figuratively, and used for schools during the week. He says, "I will build more churches and fill them with the poor."

Another bishop in Sudan tells us about his people who are returning refugees, who have nothing, no ability to grow crops or feed themselves, and are struggling to reestablish their lives. He also tells us of the presence of Al Qaeda, and large guns being carried south by nomads, and he tells us of his fears that warfare will soon break out in even larger ways. Yet that bishop, and his brother bishops, continue to speak good news to their people, to tell their stories to others, and to seek our prayers and support, particularly from the more powerful nations of the world who may yet convince Sudan to care for all its people.

The kingdom of heaven is like 650 bishops marching through the streets of this city a couple of days ago, insisting that together we can end global poverty, if we have the will to do it. Your prime minister shares that hope, and has pledged his assistance in very concrete ways, as he told us in a powerful speech on Thursday. That hope is like a mustard seed that can grow into a tree of life large and generous enough to shelter all the people of this world, but it's going to take lots of us to water and fertilize it.

Where and how do you look for the kingdom of heaven? Jesus would ask if we understood all this. It will take what is old and what is new – the good stuff from the past and the surprising possibilities of the present. As your priest told me before the service, the crypt downstairs was condemned for the dead in the 1940s, but it is open to the living now. This congregation already knows a great deal about where and how to look - you were the first radio broadcast of a religious service, you were the first lending library, you are building down into the earth in order to liberate and build up the people of this city. You claimed the

reality that people of different faiths may come together here to pray and seek divine inspiration.

Where will you look for the kingdom of heaven in your own life? What treasure do you seek? What old thing must be preserved, and what new thing is the clue to the kingdom of heaven around us? The struggle to answer those questions goes on throughout our own lives, in the church, and all around us. The fish don't have to be sorted until the end of time. So fear not, keep looking, and give thanks that when you find a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven, it is around us, even if it smells pretty fishy or whether it sounds like a riot in the wee hours of the morning.

**The Most Rev Katharine Jefferts Schori
Presiding Bishop and Primate
The Episcopal Church**

Please note: Following her sermon, Bishop Katharine took part in a discussion group with members of the congregation. A write-up of the discussion and Bishop Katharine's visit to St. Martin's can be found at:

http://www.episcopalchurch.org/79901_99408_ENG_HTM.htm