

WORSHIP AT HOME - 26th July 2020

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Opening declaration verses from Romans 8 ¹

If God is for us, who can be against us? **No one.**

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? **No one.**

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? **No one.**

Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? **No.**

In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

HYMN SF 351 – In Christ alone ²

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|---|---|
| 1. In Christ alone my hope is found,
He is my light, my strength, my song;
This Cornerstone, this solid Ground,
Firm, through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace,
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
My Comforter, my All in All,
Here in the love of Christ I stand. | 3. There in the ground His body lay,
Light of the world by darkness slain;
Then bursting forth in glorious Day
Up from the grave He rose again!
And as He stands in victory,
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me,
For I am His and He is mine -
Bought with the precious blood of Christ. |
| 2. In Christ alone! - who took on flesh,
Fullness of God in helpless babe!
This gift of love and righteousness,
Scorned by the ones He came to save;
Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid;
Here in the death of Christ I live. | 4. No guilt in life, no fear in death,
This is the power of Christ in me;
From life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny.
No power of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand;
Till He returns or calls me home,
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand! |

Prayer of adoration and confession

Lord God our gracious Father, you alone are worthy of our praise. You are great and good, gracious and kind, just and true, holy and exalted. We worship and adore you.

In Jesus you reveal your purposes and your nature. Through your word both written and made flesh in Jesus, you remind us of the depth and power of your love. We praise you for his life, death and resurrection, and for the victory won through his suffering obedience.

We thank you that in Him we are redeemed from the hold that death would have over us, having received the Holy Spirit as the seal of that redemption. We have no need to struggle to make ourselves good enough, worthy to receive your blessing.

You delight to call us your children and to share the inheritance with us. We do not understand such love and can never deserve it, but we rejoice and celebrate all that you have done and given so freely.

We now confess that when you call us sometimes we respond reluctantly;
that there are times when we do not see and times when we do not hear;
that there are times we lose our way by accident and
that there are times when we lose our way by choice.
We are truly sorry for those things you bring to our minds now.....

Your mercy is new every morning. There is nothing to separate us from your love in Jesus Christ. Calm us and quieten us. Speak to us your words of compassion, forgiveness and peace. Heal and restore us in Jesus' Name we pray. **Amen.**

Introduction to Reading

In the Bible reading today we find, just as last week, Jesus is teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven. By this he does not mean a place in the physical sense, rather he means the existence where God is fully known – his realm of existence, if you like.

When Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of Heaven, or the Kingdom of God, it is the same thing, he does so using many and varied pictures probably because it is hard to grasp and has many rich and diverse aspects to it, just like God. Here it is likened to a small seed that grows into a tree large enough to offer shelter; to yeast that is hidden in the flour but which works silently to transform it into something tasty and attractive; to treasure hidden in a field and to a pearl of great value both of which are worth giving everything to obtain, and lastly to a dragnet that catches all kinds of fish that then have to be sorted. There are links between these ways of looking at God's kingdom but they each stand alone and each deserves a talk of their own. So in a moment I'm going to invite you to think just about the two linked pictures at the heart of the reading. The Kingdom of Heaven is like buried treasure and like a pearl of great value. So let's hear this reading from Matthew's gospel.

Reading – Matthew 13: 31-33 and 44-52 ¹

³¹ He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³² Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.' ³³ He told them still another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about thirty kilograms of flour until it worked all through the dough.

⁴⁴ 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

⁴⁵ 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

⁴⁷ 'Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸ When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹ This is how it will be at the end of the age.

The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹ 'Have you understood all these things?' Jesus asked. 'Yes,' they replied. ⁵² He said to them, 'Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.'

Reflection 1

On the 5th July 2009, Terry Herbert, an ordinary amateur metal detectorist, was searching a recently ploughed field near the village of Hammerwich in Staffordshire when the tell-tale bleep in his headphones indicated the presence of metal. It turned out to be the first of a hoard of items made in the 6th or 7th Century, some 4,600 objects which were subsequently unearthed in that field by a team of archaeologists. The treasure, a total of about 11 lb of gold, 3 lb of silver and some 3,500 pieces of garnet jewellery, the precious stones having come from Afghanistan or Sri Lanka, was later valued at nearly £3.3m. As well as military and high status objects the hoard contained Christian objects including 5 crosses, a gold strip inscribed with a verse from Psalm 67 and what is probably part of the elaborately decorated cover of a Gospel. Who knows perhaps even Matthew's gospel which we have heard today!

Before banks or safety deposit boxes people buried their wealth in times of threat or invasion planning to retrieve it when the trouble had passed. Some never returned to recover their property. Pearls were valued more highly even than gold for their rarity and appearance. Both tell us that there is something precious, something worth sacrificing everything to obtain, at the heart of the meaning of these concise word pictures. So much is to be found in two single verse parables. However, they are more like a street artist's lightning sketch than a Rembrandt masterpiece - more like a hastily penned verse than an epic poem - more like a snapshot than a carefully composed, sensitively lit, and digitally enhanced studio photograph. So we must look to the heart of the story and not let the questioning of the details of the events distract us. We need to focus on the fact that both the discoverer of the treasure and the merchant gave up everything to get that which is most precious. There is joy both in the discovery and in the obtaining. There is a sacrificial cost, the selling all, to obtain. There is an urgency to possess both treasure and pearl.

This says to me knowing God, experiencing his presence, his blessings, the hope, love and vision that come from that, is worth giving everything I have to obtain. We may realise this suddenly, apparently accidentally, as the man did in the first parable or we may find it after long searching like the pearl hunter in the second but their worth is beyond price, incalculable. In the economy of God Jesus is the indescribable gift, the priceless discovery. So we must seek after God, his ways, his will - the things of God. We must lose ourselves; give up much we thought essential truly to know him. We must spend less time, energy and money on ourselves and more on God's priorities of justice, mercy and loving kindness. It is no exchange to give what you cannot keep to gain what you cannot lose. For as Jesus says, 'what good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?'

So let us pause and then pray about what I have said so far before we return to consider these rich parables from another perspective.

Responsive prayer

Faithful God, King of Heaven, ruler and sovereign of the Kingdom of Heaven, help me to seek you with the determination and commitment of the pearl merchant and the treasure hunter. May I seek you with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. May I be willing to give all I have to know you and to obtain the fullness of Kingdom life. May I give what it takes to follow Jesus in all his ways, to serve him all my days and to give him all my praise. May I lose myself in order to receive what is priceless. Kind and loving God hear the cry of my heart and help me, for commitment is hard and costly and I know myself too well. Amen.

Reflection 2

Owing to the wonder of these amazingly powerful snapshots there is another way to understand them. This is not in opposition to the interpretation I have just outlined but adds to it, both are true. They are reverse and obverse of the same coin. What if we see God as the pearl hunter or the discoverer of treasure rather than us? For is not God also looking for pearls, for buried treasure something once valuable but now discarded and lost. Does not God give everything to buy these valuable treasures? Can you see how in Jesus God comes looking, seeking to save? Can you see how God in Jesus gives everything to save and rescue human beings like you and me, every one of whom he considers precious? As the Bible says in that magnificent passage from Romans chapter 8, 'he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?'

Can you see yourself in this parable now as the pearl or that lost and hidden treasure? If you are feeling lost, unnoticed, buried away or rather lacking worth then this is for you. God is looking for you, he has already given everything for you. He declares you to be treasure, the pearl of great value the one that brings him joy when he knows you belong to him, when you understand how much he loves you and what it cost him to claim you back. This is what this imaginatively realised modern painting by Daniel Bonnell seeks to do, to see the parable from another direction. In it you see the two parables melded together as one. You see the man who has been digging in the field and finding apparently a precious pearl but in the light his spade becomes a cross and the sun blazing down upon the field the empty tomb. For it was in the cross and empty tomb that Jesus paid the price to obtain you. There he showed his love to its full extent. Have you grasped that? Has it forcibly hit you, enveloped you, changed you?

We may be likened to the pearl or the buried treasure in our precious lost ness but we are much more than that. The pearl and the treasure cannot respond in love and worship to the one who rescued them as we can. It is through the realisation of what God has done to find us, what the cost, the price he paid, the love that drove that search and rescue, that we must respond. Such love is attractive. We worship, we serve, we pray, we love others because he first loved us. It is a needy heart's response to having that need met, to meeting the 'lover of our souls' the Lord Jesus Christ. The future of the lost treasure was transformed by being found. It was cleaned up and polished. The corrupting earth and decay of ages was gently removed. Shining and like new it is displayed for all to see, to the glory of the new owner. So too the pearl, perhaps set into a ring for all to see. This is who you are in the eyes of God. Amen

Hymn SF 2981 – My worth is not in what I own³

1. My worth is not in what I own,
Not in the strength of flesh and bone
But in the costly wounds of love.
At the cross.
 2. My worth is not in skill or name,
In win or lose, in pride or shame
But in the blood of Christ that flowed.
At the cross.
 3. As summer flowers we fade and die,
Fame, youth and beauty hurry by
But life eternal calls to us.
At the cross.
 4. I will not boast in wealth or might,
Or human wisdom's fleeting light
But I will boast in knowing Christ.
At the cross.
 5. Two wonders here that I confess,
My worth and my unworthiness
My value fixed - my ransom paid.
At the cross.
- I rejoice in my Redeemer!
Greatest Treasure,
Wellspring of my soul.
I will trust in Him, no other.
My soul is satisfied in Him alone.*
- I rejoice in my Redeemer!*

West Berkshire Foodbank video

Prayers for others

We pray for the work of West Berkshire Foodbank. We thank you for all that has been achieved to feed people and to support them during this pandemic. Especially we pray for foodbank clients who find they cannot provide food for themselves and their families for whatever reason. We pray for Fran, the manager, and all volunteers working in the warehouse, delivering food parcels or supporting clients by telephone. May we be grateful for what we have and continue to be generous in sharing it. **Amen**

God of heaven in ordinary, we pray for those searching
for the precious pearl of purpose in their lives...

We pray for those desperate to find peace...

We pray for those searching for reconciliation...

We pray for those yearning for freedom...

We pray for those aching for forgiveness...

We pray for those seeking acceptance...

We pray for those longing for healing...

We pray for those anxious to find comfort...

Silence for your own prayers

We thank you that in Jesus we have found the treasure which makes our life worthwhile.
We thank you that in Jesus we have been found and declared to be treasure of great worth.
Keep us in your love and care, now and always, and bring us at last to the joys of heaven.
May your Kingdom come and your will be done, in the Name of Jesus. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

HYMN STF 548 – Blessèd assurance

Blessèd assurance, Jesus is mine;
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
born of His Spirit, washed in His blood:

*This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Saviour all the day long.*

*This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Saviour all the day long.*

Perfect submission, perfect delight,
visions of rapture burst on my sight;
angels descending, bring from above
echoes of mercy, whispers of love:

This is my story, this is my song,

Perfect submission, all is at rest,
I in my Saviour am happy and blest -
watching and waiting, looking above,
filled with His goodness, lost in His love:

This is my story, this is my song,

Frances Jane van Alstyne (Fanny Crosby) (1820-1915)

Final Blessing

Go now in peace to
live the kingdom;
share its treasures;
and hold it precious.

And now may God the Father bless you,
God the Son inspire you,
and God the Holy Spirit enlighten you
now and always. **Amen.**

Acknowledgements

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