

Seventh Sunday after Trinity
Sunday, 26th July 2020



Dear Friends,

'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?'

(Romans 8: 35)

Yet again this week, the vice-grip of Coronavirus has made its presence felt amongst many of the valued treasures of our lives. The 2020 Olympics, due to have begun in Tokyo this Friday, has sadly been cancelled. Countless hours of disciplined training by elite athletes from across the world go unrecognised as their hopes and aspirations for the treasures of Gold, Silver and Bronze medals are dashed. Across our country, schoolchildren together with students of all disciplines and ages, come to the end of their academic year with none of the usual accolades or honouring of their pearls of creativity and hard work. No gathered 'goodbyes' for those leaving primary, secondary or tertiary education; this rite of passage, restricted to small group 'bubbles' with no proud parents allowed to participate. The Cathedral service offering prayers for the work of our Littleton resident and Mayor of Winchester has also been moved online.



'Maid Reading in a Library' by Edouard John Menta

In the midst of all this temporal disruption, as Christians, we are called by Jesus to reflect on that which is spiritually important in our lives and give thanks for the love of God, which blesses us with greater treasure than we could ever have dreamed.

As we return to worship in our churches, we have opportunity to reflect as Solomon did, in answer to God's question of him *'What do you want? Ask and I will give it to you.'* (1 Kings: 3: 5) Solomon's answer, as he stood poised to inherit the Kingship of his father, David, was to seek the wisdom of an 'understanding heart' (1 Kings 3: 9) so as to govern God's people with justice, rather than seeking personal wealth or longevity. This beautiful dialogue helps us to see that God gives us what we need if we put His kingdom values first. If we put earthly values and accolades before that which God offers us, we will always end up feeling frustrated and searching for bigger and greater ways to feel good about ourselves. But, in doing what Solomon has done, and seeking God's wisdom before all else, he knows God will satisfy even his deepest needs.



'King Solomon' by Gustave Dore

In our Gospel reading this week, Jesus gives us a number of parables, beginning each one with the phrase, *'The Kingdom of heaven is like...'* And we settle back comfortably, because we know that we are about to hear Jesus tell us another story.

Yet, if we are going to learn anything from Solomon's dialogue with God, when Jesus says, *'The Kingdom of heaven is like...'* there should be a shiver running up and down our spines, because Jesus' intention is to take us *right outside* of our comfort zones - confronting us with the harsh reality of God's desire for us to put Him first in our lives.

Ostensibly, we find the Parable of the Mustard Seed comforting – Jesus telling us that big things can come from small beginnings. We link it to Jesus’ saying that we are to have faith like a mustard seed - and so we inure ourselves with the belief that it’s OK to only have a little bit of faith, because that will surely be enough. So we can relax, right? But this *isn’t at all* what Jesus was saying!



What do you think those who were listening to Jesus heard when He told them this Parable? I personally think they would have picked up on the *real* threat about a mustard plant, which was invasive - going deep into the soil. They would likely have been listening to this parable through the experience of the soul who plants the mustard seed, perhaps in the desperation of poverty, in the hope that it might produce something edible very quickly. But they would also have held the tension of the mustard plant invading the rest of the soil, making it impossible to grow anything else.

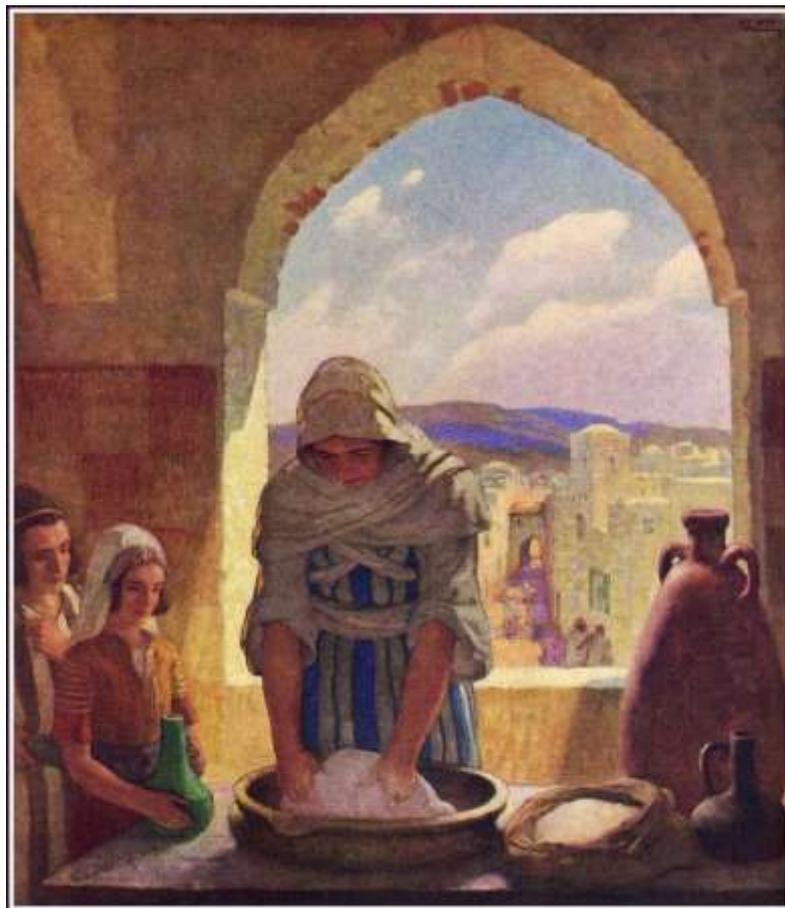
And, of course, that *invasive property* is exactly what Jesus *wants* to highlight - because His mustard seed becomes a tree and the birds come to nest in it. We get it wrong when we focus on the smallness of the seed. Jesus is teaching us the exact opposite!



'Parable of the Sower' by Pieter Bruegel the Elder

The Kingdom of God, for Jesus, is completely invasive! It might look small, and it may even be sown in desperation and out of poverty - but *it will grow and grow* and will invade the land ... and eventually become a sanctuary for others to find rest. Just as Solomon understood, Jesus wants God's Kingdom to invade and dominate our world - and this is the message He is prepared to live and die for! The Kingdom of God, therefore, comes as a threat to those who cling to the old earthly world order.

And if we have not yet got the point about the Kingdom of God being threatening, uncontainable and invasive, Jesus follows it up with another Parable: *'The kingdom of heaven is like the yeast a woman used in making bread, and mixed until all of it permeated every part of the dough.'*



'The Leaven' by N. C. Wyeth

Given that Jesus used well-understood illustrations as He spoke to those who followed Him, we have to question what yeast might have meant to the first hearers of this parable. We know that, in Jewish law, yeast was to be avoided at the most holy times of the year: unleavened bread was the order of the day. And, for those listening to Jesus who lived in a nomadic culture, yeast was recognised as being hard to handle in the heat. It was unpredictable, it bubbled up, it oozed, it collapsed, it grew again.

Jesus was not giving people the neat and comfortable images we often assume today. Mustard seeds and yeast - these are messy products. They cannot be contained or controlled. They grow in secret - and then, all of a sudden, the host environment becomes transformed!

Jesus is preparing us for a Kingdom that can be as messy and as ugly as it is beautiful. When the fishermen cast out their nets in the Sea of Galilee, they were primarily wanting to catch particular types of fish. But, when the nets were drawn back to shore, the nets would have been full of fish considered unclean to the Jewish people. The trawl of the nets would bring together both the clean and the unclean; the good and the bad, and the task of the fisherman was to separate them out ready for market. Fishing was a messy business!



'Rowboat on the Blue' by Anne Packard

As we journey together through the ravages of Coronavirus, we will be sharing hospitality and faith together in a messy place. A messy place where mistakes will be made, where painful experiences will be shared. A messy place where, hopefully, children will be noisy together once more because they are having fun! A messy place, where people of all backgrounds will find a welcome. And it is in all the mess and unpredictability we will create together, that God's beauty and truth will be found.

Jesus was prepared to die for His people because He knew that the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven was the ultimate freedom for us all. And we, as a church, are invited into that Mission today. Faith in Christ will be tough and messy and at times it will be deeply painful - but if we trust in God, if we, like Solomon have the wisdom to put Him first in our lives, we will live together for eternity in the truth of His love - our treasure above all prizes!

Yours in the unity of Christ,

Jax

Rector, The Downs Benefice

Remember that our churches are open for daily prayer and for Sunday services - please see our website for more details at: <http://downsbenefice.org/>

Short-Term Schedule for the reintroduction of Sunday services in The Downs Benefice - 19th July 2020 to 30th August 2020

	19 th July	26 th July	29 th July	2 nd August	9 th August	16 th August	23 rd August	30 th August
All Services will begin at 10am								
Chilbolton				HC		MP		
Crawley	MP							
Littleton			HC				HC	
Sparsholt	Closed	HC		Closed	MP			
Wherwell							Closed	HC
ALL SEATS MUST BE BOOKED VIA THE BENEFICE OFFICE								

I hope this table is self-explanatory, but if you do have any queries, please contact the **Benefice Office** on **(01962) 880845** or office@downsbenefice.org.uk

Box for Socks: Don't forget there is a collection box in **St Catherine's Church porch** and at **each Sunday service** for you to donate **NEW**



pairs of socks for men and women to be distributed to Winchester Nightshelter to support the 'Foot Health' programme for the hungry and homeless people on our streets.

Unfortunately, used socks cannot be accepted, only new ones. Any size welcome. Thank you!

**Homily for the 'virtual' Mayoralty Service on 23rd July 2020 at Winchester Cathedral for
Cllr Patrick Cunningham, as The Right Worshipful the Mayor of Winchester**



'Seek the welfare of the City where I have sent you, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.'

(Jeremiah 29: 7)

We are all encouraged by a leader who stirs our hearts to move forward, particularly through difficult times. In our current political landscape, our Country and our County have sought the qualities and skills of effective and unifying leadership: decisive, visionary, pragmatic and compassionate to the needs of the people – capable of guiding us through the tasks at hand; someone who will be with us all the way.

In the Old Testament, Jeremiah's divine call to leadership was prefaced by the threat of a hostile enemy, and with the need to help the people to radically re-think their attitudes towards each other. Sound familiar?

Jeremiah knew that the only way to lead God's people was with a Servant-heart: to encourage and nurture a nation of oppressed and disillusioned people back into right relationship with God and with each other, and he achieved it through the integrity of his steadfast faith, rooted in the truth that God's love would prevail.

Patrick, I can't begin to imagine what you have been feeling these past months, as you have prepared yourself for leadership as the 821st Mayor of the City of Winchester. The values and aspirations, expectations and entitlements of our world and of this ancient City of Winchester have been shaken to their very core by the ravages of Coronavirus.

Familiar Mayoral signposts: opportunities to meet and greet and grow in understanding - personally thanking and encouraging every aspect and avenue of our diverse community, all these important relational functions which have underpinned your tenure as Deputy Mayor have suddenly been thrown into a 'virtual' context.

Perhaps it feels as though you have been thrown into insurmountable territory - into exile even. But help is at hand!

I do believe the words of Jeremiah you have been asked to read for this service, are a direct prophesy from his Servant heart to yours, as *you too* confront the complexities of existential threats and cleave to guide your people forward into peace and prosperity.

Jeremiah's encouragement, rooted in the divine blessing of Creation, is the assurance of wonderful possibilities for each of our lives in all their rich complexity in the prospering of our society. All these things are possible, even in the exilic landscape of Coronavirus.

This prayerful service feels especially poignant as your Mayoralty begins with none of the anticipated Civic fanfares and Cathedral gatherings we had hoped - both for you, and for the ancient Office you are assuming. Instead, we lift you up in a deep and faithful conviction that you have been chosen to help this City and its Rural environs through this coming year; not on your own – but in faith and hope: guided by a higher authority. You will flourish if you, like Jeremiah, do not lose sight of God at the core of your life.

Your evident passion is to work for the good of all, and our City and its elected Council are in safe hands.

In the exile of the unknown world into which Coronavirus has thrown us all, Jeremiah's words speak God's call directly into your faithful heart: *'Seek the welfare of the City where I have sent you, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.'*

Patrick and Joy, may you walk boldly and joyfully into the unknown of this coming year of leadership, in the certainty that the light and peace of Father, Son and Holy Spirit go ahead of you to guide your path. Amen.



Mayor Patrick, with his Wife and Consort, Joy Cunningham

Collect Prayer for the Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Lord of all power and might,
the author and giver of all good things:
graft in our hearts the love of your name,
increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness,
and of your great mercy keep us in the same;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.



Matthew 13: 31-33; 44-52 - The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Jesus put before them another parable: 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants; it grows into a tree, and birds come and make nests in its branches.'

Jesus also used this illustration: 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like the yeast a woman used in making bread. Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough.'

'The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field. Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls. When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it!

Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a fishing net that was thrown into the water and caught fish of every kind. When the net was full, they dragged it up onto the shore, sat down, and sorted the good fish into crates, but threw the bad ones away. That is the way it will be at the end of the world. The angels will come and separate the wicked people from the righteous, throwing the wicked into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Do you understand all these things?' 'Yes,' they said, 'we do.' Then he added, 'Every teacher of religious law who becomes a disciple in the Kingdom of Heaven is like a homeowner who brings from his storeroom new gems of truth as well as old.'