

Pentecost XI (Proper 12a)  
 Rom 8.26-34; Mt 13.13-13,44-49  
 27 July 2008  
 Church of the Holy Communion

+ + +

We continue this morning working our way through this middle portion of St. Matthew's Gospel, chock full as it is with the parables of our Lord. The last two Sundays, Frs. Clarke and Sanderson, respectively, have begun their expositions with a small confession of their own sins. In keeping with the agricultural nature of the parables under consideration, Fr. Clarke let us know – we would never have guessed it ourselves – that he had "sown the seeds of laziness." And then Fr. Sanderson allowed as how he had, from time to time and in his own small way, "sown the seeds of persnickety-ness." You don't say, Father. So it has seemed the obvious thing as I prepared to preach this week that I too should begin by confessing some sin or peccadillo characteristic of my own life, and so I intended to do – but honestly I haven't been able to think of single thing! I was going to ask my wife if she had perhaps observed anything, but then I thought better.

[Actually, I forgot Fr. Clarke was to be away this morning – otherwise I would have just made a list of "The Further Sins of Fr. Clarke." But it's just as well; we haven't got all day!]

Actually, I know I am a sinner, "for the Bible tells me so." And I'm even aware of what at least some of my sins are, but they are all much too cringe-inducing for public revelation. All that's just a lead-in to saying that an understanding of the Gospel that begins by declaring that we are God's beloved, and denies or does an end-run around the terrible fact and consequences of our individual and corporate rebellion against God's goodness – a gospel which avoids the Cross, a gospel such as we clergy were recently subjected to by a certain visiting prelate – is something less than the Christian Gospel and is, as St. Paul told the Galatians, "no gospel at all." Our Lord and his fore-runner John always began their preaching with, "*Repent*, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand."

So it is important, even on a sticky July morning, that we be clear-sighted about our own sin, lest we look at the Cross, lest we eat Christ's Body and drink his Blood, and say, "What's the big deal? What does this have to do with me?"

So, we need sight, but we also, if I may make a fine distinction here to suit my own purpose, need vision. We need sight that sees what is, but we also need vision that can see what will one day be, what is coming, what is bubbling just beneath the surface of our present experience – we need vision of Christ's coming Kingdom. This vision is just what he urges on us in this string of small parables we have heard this morning. Sight sees the minute mustard seed, but vision sees *the greatest of all shrubs that becomes like a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.*

St. Paul makes much the same point in this morning's epistle lesson from Romans: we need sight to see the present reality of our sin, but we also need vision to see the great redemption and transformation that God intends, for *in everything*, in every circumstance of our lives, Paul tell us, *God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose; for those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.*

That talk of foreknowledge and predestination may raise all sorts of philosophical and theological questions for us, which I trust John Calvin and Thomas Aquinas in their heavenly fellowship have by now worked out in minute detail and to their mutual satisfaction – but leave those questions aside for the moment and look at main thrust of what Paul is telling us, what he wants us to believe and understand and to *use*: with the fullness of his divine sovereignty and power God intends to conform his redeemed people – you and me in all our cringe-inducing sinfulness, even believe it or not the lazy and persnickety – God intends to conform us to the image of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. That is what God is up to *in everything*, in and through every circumstance of our lives – the good,

the bad, and the ugly. He is loving us and shaping us and sanctifying us, fitting us for eternity in the fellowship of his love.

What we need now, "in the midst of the changes and chances of this life," Jesus tells us, is to develop the vision that sees beyond the tiny mustard seed to the fully formed tree. What we need now, Paul tells us, is the vision that sees beyond the current struggle with "the world, the flesh, and the Devil" to the victory of Christ wrought in each of us and among all of us and extending through-out the entire creation.<sup>ii</sup>

Why do we need this vision? What does it do? Well, we know. Vision of what is to be has the odd effect of working backward to transform what we experience now. This is true in simple things, and it is true in great things. I know a woman (she might be my mother-in-law) who likes to read mystery-thriller novels she borrows from the library. She likes them a great deal, except for the mysterious and thrilling parts. Often times they make her so nervous she just can't stand it. So guess what she does. That's right, she reads the last couple chapters first. Then, knowing who lives, who dies, and who it was who killed Mr. Boddy in the library with the candlestick, she can begin at the beginning, relax, and enjoy the plot's twists and turns all the way through.

Now that's a simple and maybe a silly example, but it points the way to a deeper and more complex truth, in some ways a more difficult truth, about our lives in Christ and the experience of our circumstances – good, bad, and ugly – the twists and turns of the Church's history and our own personal histories, and shows us their true meaning.<sup>iii</sup>

But this transformation doesn't happen in some saccharine, sentimental way that denies or ignores the very real pain and heartbreak we encounter in the world, still less the struggle with sin in our own hearts – but actually just the opposite. Rather than leading us to ignore or deny the hard truths of our circumstances, the vision of God's promise – the promise to conform us to the glorious image of his Son, the promise that the tiny seed of the Gospel will grow into the hospitable tree of the Kingdom, the promise of Resurrection – the vision of God's promise actually allows us and gives us the firm standing to be honest about our circumstances – because we stand on the solid rock of his love: *He who did not spare his own Son*, St. Paul reminds us, *but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?* That is the God who has made his promise and the logic of love we are to apply to all our circumstances.

We know, then, that even in the most difficult of circumstances God is at work, and his purpose will not finally be thwarted. God has made his promise; its seed is planted in us at baptism when we are sealed with Holy Ghost and marked as Christ's own forever; it is sealed with Body and Blood of Christ; and *if God is for us, who can be against us?*

+ + +

i Gal 1.6-9; cf Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts-Schori to our diocesan clergy and Bishop Lawrence's response:

<http://tinyurl.com/5mdzoo>

ii Rom 8.19-22

iii In a longer sermon, I'd take the opportunity here to compare contrast these two worldviews:

*There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own. However, nothing dispirits, and nothing seems worth while disputing. He bolts down all events, all creeds, and beliefs, and persuasions, all hard things visible and invisible, never mind how knobby; as an ostrich of potent digestion gobbles down bullets and gun flints. And as for small difficulties and worryings, prospects of sudden disaster, peril of life and limb; all these, and death itself, seem to him only sly, good-natured hits, and jolly punches in the side bestowed by the unseen and unaccountable old joker. That odd sort of wayward mood I am speaking of, comes over a man only in some time of extreme tribulation; it comes in the very midst of his earnestness, so that what just before might have seemed to him a thing most momentous, now seems but a part of the general joke. There is nothing like the perils of whaling to breed this free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy; and with it I now regarded this whole voyage of the Pequod, and the great White Whale its object. (Herman Melville in Moby Dick)*

and

*Dear friends, life is not governed by chance; it is not random. Your very existence has been willed by God, blessed and given a purpose (cf. Gen 1:28)! Life is not just a succession of events or experiences, helpful though many of them are. It is a search for the true, the good and the beautiful. It is to this end that we make our choices; it is for this that we exercise our freedom; it is in this – in truth, in good-ness, and in beauty – that we find happiness and joy. Do not be fooled by those who see you as just another consumer in a market of undifferentiated possibilities, where choice itself becomes the good, novelty usurps beauty, and subjective experience displaces truth.*

*Christ offers more! Indeed he offers everything! Only he who is the Truth can be the Way and hence also the Life. Thus the "way" which the Apostles brought to the ends of the earth is life in Christ. This is the life of the Church. (Benedict XVI at World Youth Day in Sydney, July 2008)*