

OPENING COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, by whose Spirit the whole body of the Church is governed and sanctified: hear our prayer which we offer for all your faithful people, that in their vocation and ministry they may serve you in holiness and truth to the glory of your name; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.. **Amen.**

FIRST READING: Isaiah 55.10-13

Thus says the LORD:

10 As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

12 For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. 13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

SECOND READING: Romans 8.1-11

1 There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God;

Epistle continued:

it does not submit to God's law – indeed it cannot, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

We are moving towards something of a climax in Matthew's presentation, in his Gospel, of the ministry of Jesus, which has included the pilot mission, and, last week, a discussion of the lack of recognition of John the Baptist and, of course, of Jesus himself. This week's readings pose the question 'why is the message not heard?' There are three areas to look at, if you like. The authority of the message, the skill of the messenger and the alertness of the recipient! Isaiah talks about the first of these, the word of God, and it is difficult for Christians not to think immediately of Jesus. For Isaiah, the word has ultimate authority: it will achieve what God intends. The conviction that God is in control, and intends peace and fulfilment for all, is the basic premise of faith. If God has promised this, then it will happen, but how will the message be heard?

Paul gives us part of the answer, for, in a way, he is on about the messenger! Chapters five to eight of Romans have long been seen, by scholars, as the heart of the epistle, and the heart of Paul's gospel. In the preceding chapters, much of which we have read over the last few weeks, Paul has argued that Jesus has opened up a new life for those who have faith. They are, now, in a right relationship with God- "by grace are you saved through faith". Paul had to learn, in his own life and experience, that salvation, which is really wholeness or fulfilment, comes not by keeping the Law, meticulously, but by trusting for life, in

God. This is to 'walk in the Spirit' or to 'set the mind on the Spirit'; to 'be in the Spirit'.

9 But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Gospel: Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23

1 Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake.

2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow.

4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.

6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

9 Let anyone with ears listen! 18 Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart;

this is what was sown on the path. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while,

and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. 22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.

23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.'

Those who find faith, in this way, know what the gospel is about, at first hand. They are fully alive (v.11). They are ready, or should be ready, to be God's messengers to the thirsty world; confident in their proclamation of the Good News. But will they be heard?

For some, the fascinating thing about reading a gospel through, week by week, is to see how passages fit together, to realise that one gospel writer may use a passage in a different place from another, and, as in today's Gospel, that other material may be inserted by one writer, but not by another. So, here, Matthew is using a well-known parable (the Sower), which is also found in Luke 8 and Mark 4, but his interest is not just in the parable and its explanation. Read the three gospel passages together, and you will realise that Matthew emphasises (in the verses, which we omit!) that though the people are 'hard of hearing', the disciples are well on the way to receiving the message (Jesus says they can see and hear, v.16). In all three Gospels, they do not immediately understand the parable, but at least they are interested and they ask questions; they are prepared to grapple with the truth! The message may require some change in them, as it did in Paul, and in his attitude to the truth, represented by the Law. Love is greater than the Law. Becoming a messenger for God is not just about being able to repeat a formula of words; it is about understanding (v.33) the great purpose of God, about grappling with the truth, about glimpsing the vision and being prepared to share it. The message is clear, the messenger should be clear: the hearer of the message may or may not respond!

Post-Communion Collect:

Grant, O Lord, we beseech you, that the course of this world may be so peaceably ordered by your governance, that your Church may joyfully serve you in all godly quietness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.