

July 12th 2020 Sermon for St George's Eastergate:

I am this morning preaching in a church with a real congregation for the first time in over 3 months...and is great! There are real people here to speak to; to see real reactions from; to be able to smile at and who can smile back at me! It is in a way more difficult to make this step than it was to lock down in the first place. One thing in particular that I was worried about was that coming back into 'actual' church from having been part of 'virtual' church for so long would leave out those who are not able yet to meet back here. As you can see this problem has been solved for us by my able and so so willing technical director..Jonathan who, as I speak, is filming this service so that those at home can watch the service later this morning. Jonathan deserves from all of us a tremendous round of thanks for all he has and is doing to keep us bonded as a Christian community.

At the end of our services, just before the dismissal, as you know I have started saying "worship is ended, service now begins" then " go in peace to love and serve the Lord". This week, as I was thinking about today's message, I was prompted to ask myself the question what is worship for? What is its purpose in our lives? And the best answer I could think of, with today's readings in mind, was that it is to equip us for the task of playing our part in the growing of God's Kingdom here on earth...in our little part of it in particular. This of course is very apt for the present time when we are all aware that the world around us has changed a great deal this year and will not be going back to the way it was. Some of you may have noticed that in the July magazine as well as in some of the Contact Newsletters I have put in a suggestion that some people who have

been watching our virtual church services from the privacy of their own homes might welcome the opportunity of thinking about the faith they have not thought about for a long time and tap into an online Alpha course. Have any of us known anyone who might like a prod in this direction? We have been exploring in these last months have we not new ways of sharing the Gospel with our neighbourhood.

We all have the readings in front of us this week and I want us firstly to look at the Epistle...Roman 8 v 1-11... I was amused to see Bishop Tom Wright's description of this section of his letter to the early Christians in Rome...especially since one of the things Peter and I have been doing during these last few months is to go out on his sailing boat in Chichester harbour. Tom Wright says this of this section of Romans.."Romans 8 v 1-11 carries the power of the gospel in every breath. If the church could hoist its sails and catch this wind, there is no knowing what might happen!" Did I not say that one of the purposes of us coming together to worship is to equip us for growing God's kingdom? We had better have a closer look then at this passage!

The growth of God's kingdom here on earth is of course the work of God the Holy Spirit; and its no accident that this particular passage has the heading in the new revised standard edition of the Bible.."Life in the Spirit" Right at the centre of St Paul's thinking is that the intention of God's law for human beings, encapsulated in the 10 commandments which we remind ourselves of every week and which were central to Sauls thinking as a Jewish Pharisee before his conversion, is to enable them to live the liberating life that they were created for. This, Paul reminded his readers in the earlier chapters of Romans, in our flawed human nature of course is very difficult if not impossible to do completely. It can only be

completely and gloriously achieved, when by the Spirit, God gives the resurrection life to all who belong to Jesus; when the spiritual part of us comes alive again. Now in these verses of this week's Epistle he explores this further. He explains that it is possible for us to "walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 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." ...we are reminded each week in our worship of the things of the Spirit and need a daily reminder of this in our prayers and Bible readings. We CAN live the satisfying and liberating and joyful life God intends for us; we do not need to be bogged down by our failings and fears; at the same time of course God understands and forgives and strengthens us. That is what we are being reminded of this morning.

What now of Jesus' words in our Gospel reading? The Parable of the Sower and its meaning? This is a story very familiar to us and it would, for that reason, be very easy to skate over without giving it much attention. When we are tempted to do that we need to remind ourselves that this isn't just a story with a moral it is supposed to be prophetic; i.e it is supposed to lead to action that fulfils the message. Jesus is telling people on the shores of the Sea of Galilee that God's kingdom was breaking in to their world. He was teaching them, country people, in a way that they would understand..BUT NOTE..the section that we have for our Gospel reading leaves out the middle verses that explain that when Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables with illustrations from their everyday lives most of them would not understand what the spiritual message was. What we have this morning is the parable itself and then the explanation Jesus gave to his disciples. What he wanted them to understand was the same as he wants us to

understand and it is of paramount importance if we are going to be joining in the work of building His kingdom in our newly formed world.

One thing a lot of us have been doing more of lately is gardening so a lot of what Jesus says here has resonance for us. For me the most important thing gardening teaches me is patience...seed and plants never grow quick enough for me and there are always aphids and slugs that try to destroy what I am trying to grow. God's kingdom grows at God's pace, not ours and we don't always understand why we don't get quick results we can see.

We are not Galilean farmers but we all need to make connections between our mundane everyday lives and the kingdom of God; as well as our place within it. At the moment we need to be asking ourselves where is our God in the events of this global pandemic and economic crisis?

Remember that George Herbert's prayer in the hymn

"Teach me my God and King

In all things thee to see,

And what I do in anything

To do it as for thee."

We need to be doing just that , even when it is a hard grind; attentively and prayerfully we need always to be asking questions of ourselves and God so that when things happen in our lives, and they will good and bad, we need not be like the seed that is choked by weeds, eaten by birds, or shrivelled for lack of roots.

AMEN.