



# WELCOME TO ST PETER'S ASH



***THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AT ST PETER'S IS CALLED TO CELEBRATE, LIVE AND REFLECT THE LOVE OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST***

**26<sup>th</sup> JULY 2020**

**TRINITY 7**

<u>READINGS FOR TODAY</u>	PARISH OFFICE: Closed until further notice. TEL:01252 331161: e- mail: <a href="mailto:office@saint-peters-ash.org.uk">office@saint-peters-ash.org.uk</a> BOOKINGS OF WEDDINGS & BAPTISMS – 01252 321517 WEBSITE: <a href="http://www.saint-peters-ash.org.uk">www.saint-peters-ash.org.uk</a>
1 Kings 3 v 5 - 12	
Romans 8 v 26 - end	
Matthew 13 v 31 – 33 & 44 - 52	



*The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed*

\*\*\*\*\*

COLLECT FOR – TRINITY 7

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.

\*\*\*\*\*

## CHURCH SERVICES

We are pleased to say that there will be two services of Holy Communion once again every Sunday. An 8 am Holy Communion in St Peter's Centre, and a 10 am Family Communion in church. We are unable to have both services in the same building at present, due to issues relating to the cleaning that would be necessary between the services. (The usual second Sunday pattern of Morning Worship at 10 am followed by Parish Communion at 11 – 15 am will NOT be happening either, for the same reasons.)

On Wednesdays there will be a service of Holy Communion at 9 – 30 am in church, in the nave, not in the Lady Chapel. Unfortunately, there can be no coffee and chat after this service at present.

Social distancing and Public Health requirements must be met. The two-metre distancing 'rule' applies for public worship. The maximum number that we will be able to accommodate in church will be 40. In St Peter's Centre the number will be 15. To preserve social distancing in church you will be shown to your seat by a Steward. From THIS SUNDAY please wear a face covering in church to all services.

Certain groups of people may be at increased risk of severe disease from COVID-19, including people who are

aged 70 or older, regardless of medical conditions. Individuals who fall within these groups are advised to stay at home as much as possible and, if they do go out, to take

particular care to minimise contact with others outside of their household. They should carefully consider the risks associated with indoor gatherings and decide, accordingly, whether to attend public worship at this time. Those who are shielding until 31<sup>st</sup> July should not attend at this time. We shall be continuing to provide the Pew Sheet services for those who cannot attend, or who prefer not to.

Everyone will have to use the hand sanitiser provided on entry and exit from the building. Also, we will be requesting the names of attendees, and these details will be kept for 21 days to assist NHS Track and Trace if required. It is essential that people do not gather on the church path, at the doorway, in the porch or in the foyer at the Centre.

Anyone showing symptoms of COVID-19 should not attend church due to the risk they pose to others. They should self-isolate at home.

To minimise the risk of transmission a disposable service sheet will be provide rather than the usual booklets. Singing will not form part of our worship. There will be no 'passing the peace'. Holy Communion will be in the form of the bread only (except for the celebrant) and hands should be sanitised before receiving. Kneeling at the rail is not permitted. Only the celebrant will prepare the altar and touch the vessels. There can be no servers or Communion Assistants at present. Communion will be brought to you at your seat.

The services will be shorter than usual. On Sundays the 'sermon' will be the same as that printed on the pew sheet. After the 10 am service, sadly, we will be unable to have our usual coffee time together. Also, people must not stay and chat inside the building. Outside, in the churchyard and in the car park, social distancing rules will still apply.

In an emergency, the disabled toilet in St Peter's Centre will be available. The other toilets are out of use.

The pandemic is not over and we all need to stay alert to save lives. I hope that you will still be able to enjoy worshipping God at St Peter's and we look forward to welcoming you.

(Fr Keith on behalf of the PCC.)

## Morning Prayer at 10 am on Sunday

*If there is more than one person present, someone may wish to read the parts marked (L), everyone says the rest together. You can say alternate verses in the Psalm and in the Canticles. Please have a Bible to hand. You may wish to light a candle.*

(L) O Lord, open our lips  
All: and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

All Visit us with your salvation  
and sustain us with your gracious Spirit.

O come, let us sing to the Lord; ♦  
let us heartily rejoice in the rock of our salvation.  
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving ♦  
and be glad in him with psalms.  
For the Lord is a great God ♦  
and a great king above all gods.  
Come, let us worship and bow down ♦  
and kneel before the Lord our Maker.  
For he is our God; ♦  
we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.

All Glory to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now  
and shall be for ever. Amen.

*This hymn is said or sung:*

Jesus shall reign where e'er the sun  
doth his successive journeys run;  
his kingdom stretch from shore to shore,  
till moons shall wax and wane no more.

People and realms of every tongue  
dwell on his love with sweetest song;  
and infant voices shall proclaim  
their early blessings on his Name.

Blessings abound where'er he reigns:  
the prisoners leap to lose their chains,  
the weary find eternal rest,  
and all the humble poor are blest.

To him shall endless prayer be made,  
and praises throng to crown his head;  
his Name like incense shall rise  
with every morning sacrifice.

Let every creature rise and bring  
peculiar honours to our King;  
angels descend with songs again,  
and earth repeat the loud Amen.

(L) The night has passed, and the day lies open before  
us; let us pray with one heart and mind:

All: As we rejoice in the gift of this new day,  
so may the light of your presence, O God,  
set our hearts on fire with love for you;  
now and for ever. Amen.

(L) God so loved the world that he gave his only Son  
Jesus Christ to save us from our sins, to be our advocate  
in heaven, and to bring us to eternal life.

Let us confess our sins in penitence and faith,  
firmly resolved to keep God's commandments and to live  
in love and peace with all.

*Pause to call to mind our sins, then we say:*

All Almighty God, our heavenly Father,  
we have sinned against you  
and against our neighbour  
in thought and word and deed,  
through negligence, through weakness,  
through our own deliberate fault.  
We are truly sorry  
and repent of all our sins.  
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,  
who died for us,  
forgive us all that is past  
and grant that we may serve you in newness of life  
to the glory of your name.  
Amen.

*All say The Gloria:*

Glory to God in the highest,  
and peace to his people on earth.  
Lord God, heavenly King,  
almighty God and Father,  
we worship you, we give you thanks,  
we praise you for your glory.  
Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,  
Lord God, Lamb of God,  
you take away the sin of the world:  
have mercy on us;  
you are seated at the right hand of the Father:  
receive our prayer.  
For you alone are the Holy One,  
you alone are the Lord,  
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,  
with the Holy Spirit,  
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

*We now say the collect for Trinity 7 (see previous page):*

*Read 1 Kings 3 v 5 – 12 followed by Psalm 119v 129 - 136  
concluding with:*

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as  
it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

*Read Romans 8 v 26 - end*

(L) Alleluia, alleluia. The word of the Lord endures for  
ever. The word of the Lord is the good news  
announced to you.

All: Alleluia.

*Now read Matthew 13 v 31 – 33 & 44 – 52 Here are some  
thoughts on the readings from Fr. Keith:*

*During lockdown I have been doing more reading than  
usual. I have enjoyed what I have read, but get annoyed  
with myself that I seem to remember only a fraction of it.  
Now, I don't think I need to worry about the onset of  
dementia yet, but I'm sure it's the case for most people that  
we don't retain in our minds a great deal of the information  
that we are bombarded with every day. Politicians and  
advertising agencies have long recognised this, and hence,  
we now live in the age of the 'catchphrase', the 'slogan'  
and the 'soundbite'. If supermarkets developed the  
strategy of 'stack it high and sell it cheap', those wanting  
to influence us have the strategy – 'keep it short, keep it  
simple' to get their message across.*

*They were all pre-empted, of course, by Jesus, 2000 years  
ago! When asked about the Law, Jesus reduced it to two  
commandments – Love God, and love your neighbour as  
yourself. Not difficult to remember! Jesus adopted the  
same tactic with his teaching, so that more people might  
have a fighting chance of holding on to what was important*

*in his message. Think of the 'Beatitudes' - all those one line 'Blesseds'. Our Gospel reading today is another example of Jesus choosing his words carefully being concise, to the point and therefore memorable.*

*The mini parables in Matthew 13 were most likely not told one after another as they are presented here. They were said on different occasions and just collected together here, as they have a common theme - 'the Kingdom of heaven is like'..... a mustard seed that grows into a big shrub, yeast mixed with flour, a treasure hidden in a field, a merchant searching for fine pearls, a net thrown into the sea'. You can imagine people going home after listening to Jesus and being able to recount them to their families and friends without distorting them. They use straightforward, everyday images and could easily be passed on to others, and eventually written down for us to learn from too. As such they have survived in a way that more complicated stories and theology probably would not. So, Jesus knew what he was doing, and he has set us a great example of how we should be passing on the gospel message today.*

*Jesus' message was all about the need for repentance and readiness for the imminent day of judgement. Today's stories tell us several things, that - the Kingdom of heaven may start small but will grow large, that it's like leaven in the world - small but able to have a powerful influence. That it's worth giving up everything else for, as it is the most valuable thing of all. That everyone will be caught up in the net of the Kingdom, but only the righteous will be kept in it.*

*Jesus asks the disciples - Have you understood all this? They answer 'yes' - because he kept it simple. Our challenge is to do the same - learn from Jesus and also from the 'influencers' of today - how they get their messages noticed and retained by not complicating them.*

*When God asked Solomon what he wanted from him at the beginning of his reign, Solomon asked for 'wisdom' - an understanding mind, able to discern between good and evil. God was impressed by this request, that Solomon hadn't asked for long life or riches or the life of his enemies. I'm sure God would be just as pleased with us if we were to ask the same of him as well. We have the gift of the Spirit within us to help us and we need to pay attention to the wisdom he can give to us as we set out to preach the good news of the Kingdom. Keeping it simple, straightforward, and concise is possible without dumbing down if we have our ears attuned to what God wants to say through us.*

*Jesus also says that we should be like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. We shouldn't try to say everything about the Kingdom at once and thereby overwhelm people with too much information. We can afford to pace ourselves and let the Holy Spirit guide us. Likewise, what we say doesn't all have to be 'new'. Tradition has its' part to play in our strategy too, words from the past still ring true today.*

*There is an old theatrical saying that urges entertainers to always leave their audience wanting more, rather than feeling overburdened, bored and eager to escape! We need to keep what we have to say interesting and to the point, so that they'll not only understand but be able to remember. It mustn't become an ego-trip. Telling people about the coming Kingdom should never be about us and how we can demonstrate our eloquence or intelligence - it's all about God, His love for His world and all the people in it.*

*As the old Shaker song puts it: 'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free, 'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be, And when we find ourselves in the place just right, 'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.' Amen.*

*Now pause for your own reflections, and then we say the Apostles' Creed:*

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.  
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.

*We now say together:*

*All: You have raised up for us a mighty Saviour,  
born of the house of your servant David.*

- 1 Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, ♦  
who has come to his people and set them free.*
- 2 He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour, ♦  
born of the house of his servant David.*
- 3 Through his holy prophets God promised of old ♦  
to save us from our enemies,  
from the hands of all that hate us,*
- 4 To show mercy to our ancestors, ♦  
and to remember his holy covenant.*
- 5 This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham  
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,*
- 6 Free to worship him without fear, ♦  
holy and righteous in his sight  
all the days of our life.*
- 7 And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the  
Most High, ♦  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,*
- 8 To give his people knowledge of salvation ♦  
by the forgiveness of all their sins.*
- 9 In the tender compassion of our God ♦  
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,*
- 10 To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the  
shadow of death, ♦  
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

*All Glory to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now  
and shall be for ever. Amen.*

*All: You have raised up for us a mighty Saviour,  
born of the house of your servant David.*

*Our prayers today are written by Ceri Hurcombe:*

*To our God who is always among us, we give you thanks  
and praise for the wonderful gift of your son Jesus Christ.  
We bring to mind all those who bring healing and peace to  
others. We send thanks for those who are there in our lives*

before we call for help, for those who put a loving arm around us and for those who pray for us.

We rejoice with the whole church in celebrating your love for us.

We ask for your blessing upon any churches where there is oppression or persecution at this time. We pray for all who preach the word and celebrate the sacraments and especially for those whose faith is being lived out in prisons or refugee camps.

We send our thanks for Father Keith and Carol who lead our services here at St Peters and others who contribute to our church community in many other ways. We pray that we use this time of restriction in our daily lives to grow in faith and in fellowship with each other.

Lord in your mercy  
HEAR OUR PRAYER

We pray for all those living in fear, caught up in war or violence. We remember those in desperate financial need, those who are homeless and those who live their lives in fear or with anxiety. We pray for all those throughout the world who are neglected or who feel they aren't needed or wanted. We ask you Lord to show them you love and care about them.

We pray for all those around the world suffering with Coronavirus, especially where medical care isn't available for them.

We pray for charities who are suffering from loss of income due to cancelled fundraising events. Help us to remember them when we can and pray for them and the valuable work and research they do.

Lord in your mercy  
HEAR OUR PRAYER

We ask for your blessing on young people in our community. We ask you to be with all those facing changes at this time, those who have left school to start college and others preparing for university. We pray that children are able have a stress-free summer break without worry and pressures from the world around them. We send thanks for the teaching staff at our local schools and for all the flexible work they have had to do over the past few months.

Lord in your mercy  
HEAR OUR PRAYER

We give you thanks that nothing can separate us from your love. We ask for your blessing upon all who are unwell or awaiting treatment at this time. Help us all to do what we can to support others known to us.

Help us to keep others in the forefront of our thoughts and prayers and remember those who are in need of our love and care. We take a moment to think of those who are following the service at home and who aren't able to return to church at this time.

Lord in your mercy  
HEAR OUR PRAYER

We remember all those who have died recently and those whose anniversary of death comes at this time. Lord, grant those who have gone before us the gift of life and joy eternal.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

As Jesus taught us, so we pray: Our Father in heaven....

*This hymn may be said or sung:*

How lovely on the mountains are the feet of Him  
Who brings good news, good news  
Proclaiming peace, announcing news of happiness  
Our God reigns, our God reigns

*Chorus:*  
*Our God reigns, our God reigns*  
*Our God reigns, our God reigns*

You watchmen lift your voices joyfully as one  
Shout for your King, your King,  
See face to face the Lord restoring Zion  
Our God reigns, Our God reigns!

*Chorus*

Waste places of Jerusalem break forth with joy  
We are redeemed, redeemed  
The Lord has saved and comforted His people  
Our God reigns, our God reigns!

*Chorus*

Ends of the earth, see the salvation of your God  
Jesus is Lord, is Lord.  
Before the nations He has bared His holy arm  
Our God reigns, our God reigns!

*Chorus*

*Let us pray:*

*(L) Generous God,*  
*you give us gifts and make them grow:*  
*though our faith is small as mustard seed,*  
*make it grow to your glory*  
*and the flourishing of your kingdom;*  
*through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*All: May the God of all grace,*  
*who called us to his eternal glory in Christ Jesus,*  
*establish, strengthen and settle us in the faith;*  
*and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,*  
*and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us and all*  
*who we love, today and always. Amen.*

May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace, and rise with Christ in glory. Amen.

\*\*\*\*\*

**READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK – TRINITY 8**

Isaiah 55 v 1 - 5; Romans 9 v 1 - 5;  
Matthew 14 v 13 - 21

\*\*\*\*\*

**HAPPY BIRTHDAY THIS WEEK TO:**

**ANDREW THOMPSON (TODAY); SHEILA TAYLOR & CHRISTINE BEER (30<sup>TH</sup>)**

\*\*\*\*\*

There is a free national phone line 'Daily Hope' that offers music, prayers and reflections as well as full worship services. Available 24 hours a day on **0800 804 8044**

\*\*\*\*\*

## Evening Prayer for this week

O Lord open our lips,  
and our mouth shall show forth your praise.

O God make speed to save us.  
O Lord, make haste to help us.

- 1 Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, ♦  
you that by night stand in the house of the Lord.
- 2 Lift up your hands towards the sanctuary ♦  
and bless the Lord.
- 3 The Lord who made heaven and earth ♦  
give you blessing out of Zion.

*All* Glory to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now  
and shall be for ever. Amen.

*This hymn may be said or sung:*

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds  
In a believer's ear!  
It soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds,  
And drives away our fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole  
And calms the troubled breast;  
'Tis manna to the hungry soul,  
And to the weary, rest.

O Jesus, shepherd, guardian, friend,  
My Prophet, Priest, and King,  
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,  
Accept the praise I bring.

How weak the effort of my heart,  
How cold my warmest thought;  
But when I see you as you are,  
I'll praise you as I ought.

Till then I would your love proclaim  
With every fleeting breath;  
And may the music of your name  
Refresh my soul in death.

That this evening may be holy, good and peaceful,  
we pray with one heart and mind:

*Silence is kept.*

As our evening prayer rises before you, O God,  
so may your mercy come down upon us  
to cleanse our hearts  
and set us free to sing your praise  
now and for ever. Amen.

*A Psalm is said: Mon 4; Tue 9; Wed 11; Thurs 18; Fri 22;  
Sat 24, ending with:*

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever.  
Amen.

*Two Scripture Readings now follow (see below). Between  
the two readings we say:*

*All* Let us rejoice and exult  
and give glory and homage to our God.

- 1 Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, ♦  
whose judgements are true and just.
- 2 Praise our God, all you his servants, ♦  
all who fear him, both small and great.

- 3 The Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns: ♦  
let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory.
- 4 For the marriage of the Lamb has come ♦  
and his bride has made herself ready.
- 5 Blessed are those who are invited ♦  
to the wedding banquet of the Lamb.

*All* To the One who sits on the throne and to the Lamb ♦  
be blessing and honour and glory and might,  
for ever and ever. Amen.

*All* Let us rejoice and exult  
and give glory and homage to our God.

*Readings:*

Monday: Ezekiel 14 v 12 - end; 2 Cor 11 v 1 - 15  
Tuesday: Ezekiel 18 v 1 - 20; 2 Cor 11 v 16 - end  
Wednesday: Ezekiel 18 v 21 - 32; 2 Corinthians 12  
Thursday: Ezekiel 20 v 1 - 20; 2 Corinthians 13  
Friday: Ezekiel 20 v 21 - 38; James 1 v 1 - 11  
Saturday: Ezekiel 24 v 15 - end ; James 1 v 12 - end

*Gospel Canticle: The Magnificat (The Song of Mary)*

*All* You have done great things, O God,  
and holy is your name.

1) My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit  
rejoices in God my Saviour; he has looked with favour on  
his lowly servant.

2) From this day all generations will call me blessed; the  
Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his  
name.

3) He has mercy on those who fear him, from generation  
to generation.

4) He has shown strength with his arm and has scattered  
the proud in their conceit.

5) Casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting  
up the lowly.

6) He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the  
rich away empty.

7) He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, to  
remember his promise of mercy.

8) The promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and  
his children for ever.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever.  
Amen.

*All* You have done great things, O God,  
and holy is your name.

*Prayers of thanksgiving are made for the day that is  
ending. Intercessions are offered for the church, the  
world and for individuals, the sick and the departed.*

Our Father, who art in heaven ...

The Collect for this week (see first page)

O Holy Spirit, giver of light and life,  
impart to us thoughts better than our own thoughts,  
and prayers better than our own prayers,  
and powers better than our own powers,  
that we may spend and be spent  
in the ways of love and goodness,

after the perfect image of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray, and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night, for the love of your only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore. Amen.

May the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **CARE AND SHARE**

Our initiative to help those who may be short on food supplies in the current crisis. Food is being left outside church for people to take for themselves, or to share with others who they know are in need. If you would like to donate any tins, packets, UHT milk etc. please leave it on the doorstep of the Rectory. Thank you.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **DON'T FORGET OUR ST PETER'S PRAYER CHAIN**

If you would like emergency prayer for yourself or somebody else please phone: 01252 322292 or 01252 323037 – this is a confidential service.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **HATING NO ONE**

This extract comes from the writings of Thomas Merton, a Trappist Monk, who joined the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani near Louisville, Kentucky in 1941. This was written on July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1963, but rings true today, surrounded, as we still are, by prejudice, racism and intolerance of those who are 'different' from us:

'How true it is that the great obligation of the Christian, *especially now*, is to prove himself a disciple of Christ by *hating no one*, that is to say, by condemning no one, rejecting no one. And how true that the impatience that fumes at others and damns them (especially whole classes, races, nations) is a sign of the weakness that is still unliberated, still not tracked by the Blood of Christ, and is still a stranger to the Cross.'

\*\*\*\*\*

### **SERMON FOR THIS WEEK FROM BISHOP JO**

#### **Similes for the Kingdom of Heaven**

Romans 8.26-39 & Matthew 13.31-33,44-52

"When you are a Bear of Very Little Brain, and you Think of Things, you find sometimes that a Thing which seemed very Thingish inside you is quite different when it gets out into the open and has other people looking at it." So wrote A.A. Milne of Winnie the Pooh.

A bit of me wonders if Jesus knew we humans were beings of very little brain. And that a thing that is wholly thingish, completely given, to someone who came from heaven is quite different and often incomprehensible when viewed by earthlings. The

problem is we don't easily get it. And so Jesus talks in parables – and some parables are only a sentence in length, more of a simile than a story.

And so to Jesus' description of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is very eager to help us to engage with what the kingdom of heaven is like, yet it takes quite a few goes. And today in Matthew 13 we have quite a collection of attempts, angles, to help us get some handles on what the kingdom of heaven is like. It's like lots of things, quite simple things really, yet clearly it takes a whole number of approaches and images and descriptors for us to begin to grasp it or explain it or imagine it.

What is the kingdom of heaven like? It's like a mustard seed which someone planted, the smallest of seeds that grows into the biggest of bushes. It's like yeast that a woman took and mixed with a load of flour which leavened the whole lot. It's like treasure, which someone finds and hides, and then sells everything to buy. It's like a merchant looking for fine pearls who, on finding the finest, is willing to sell everything else to buy it. It's like a fishing net that catches a ton of fish, even though some of it is good and some of it bad. I imagine Jesus could have gone on with more similes, more simple pictures through which we might further glimpse facets of the kingdom of heaven.

In one sense, you might say it's like nothing else. In another sense, it's like all manner of common experiences. Today I want to explore some of the features that this collection of similes has in common.

Each of them starts with some aspect of God's creation, something that humans have had no part in creating yet with which we commonly engage. Clearly the kingdom of heaven begins with us recognising the grace of God in what is already there, quite apart from us – in the varying spheres of agriculture, of the kitchen, of trade, at sea. Yet that gift of creation becomes coupled with some aspect of human endeavour – it changes because of our labour, our work. So, there is something that does not originate with us, something our earth offers that is purely the fruit of our Creator – seeds, yeast, treasure, pearls, fish – yet which when nurtured by our own efforts (of sowing, cooking, buying, selling, fishing) becomes something abundant and much more significant. Through our various roles it comes to be more like the kingdom of heaven but it does not begin with anything we do – it begins with some raw materials that are simply there, that we're given. So I dare to suggest you might improvise and imagine some further similes for the kingdom of heaven along similar principles, perhaps related to your line of work or engagement. The kingdom of God is like a pattern that someone

drew... like a child that someone raised... like a country that someone visited... like coffee that someone harvested and brewed... like a courtyard in which someone danced... like some stones someone found and designed a bridge... I don't know... like a puppy that someone trained...

Now, I want to dig a little deeper into these similes to understand what God might be up to in his exercise of kingship, in the domain of the heavenly realms. We've started with the *what* of the kingdom of heaven. Now to the *where*. We might imagine the kingdom of heaven to be all about God, but Jesus voices something fundamental about how God works. God chooses to work with and through human vessels. And so there is a relationship between heaven and earth, a working relationship between the divine and the human. The kingdom of heaven is not just about heaven, but about earth too. Indeed it takes place here, among us. It's about the transformation of the earth, the world that we know, here and now. It's not about some kind of translation that takes us away from the 'stuff' of life as we know it – it happens right here in the messy space where we live.

And then to the 'who' – to that partnership, the working relationship whereby God and humanity are both at play. Let's be clear God could work perfectly well – actually, far more efficiently – without us, but God chooses to work with us and through us. God does not need us to fulfil any purposes, yet God invites partnership and that partnership is real. Partnership that is real involves mutuality and interdependence. That means, if we fail to sow seed, the seed may fail to grow. If we fail to put the yeast in the dough, the leaven will not take place, if we don't cast a net, the fish will never be caught. God elects to take the risk of collaboration. Why would God do that? For the sake of relationship. Real relationship. Which means we become partners – yes partners in the business sense, like partners in a law firm or a GP surgery, where there's shared ownership and investment and responsibility and reward. Let's not pretend we're equal partners. The kingdom of heaven could surely happen without us, but Jesus describes how God chooses only to do it *with us*. God chooses to tango.

So we've looked at the *what* of the kingdom of heaven, and the *where* of the kingdom of heaven, and the *who* of the kingdom of heaven. Finally I want to talk about the *how* of the kingdom of heaven. You will understand from Romans, I'm sure, that we're justified by faith and not by works; yet the kingdom of heaven happens when God's people invest. It's not just that God doesn't do it alone; it's also that God gives us meaningful work to do, God embraces our gifts and graces, God uses our

skills to plant or bake or trade or discern or fish. God engages us in work so that we're invested. God gives us responsibility. We're not passive onlookers watching our mighty God scoring all the goals: God passes us the ball, we're engaged participants. We're not just invited but expected to play ball. And that engagement is fundamental to the outcome, to the finds, to the fruit, to the fulfilment.

On the one hand you might just call this the logic of cause and effect. Because we're giving to the game, we share the results. Effort in, reward out. But on the other hand the magnitude of the outcome bears little relation to the magnitude of the input. What begins in scarcity ends in abundance – just as with the miraculous catch of fish when Peter had been out there trying all day. Or the overwhelming flow of fine wine when the wedding guests thought they'd run dry. Or the baskets of food leftover – when there was only a small boy's picnic for five thousand.

The kingdom of heaven begins with grace; it continues with partnership; and it ends with surprise, and joy, in overwhelming disproportion.

But there's a final thing I want to point out and I think it's vital. It demands – or at least it assumes – that we're not just 'in' but 'all in'. On the one hand the parables invites us to put ourselves in the role of the sower and the bread-maker and particularly the treasure hunter and the merchant: and note that these people risk everything. They put in their efforts freely and wholeheartedly, risking that their efforts could be wasted but finding instead the reward is all consuming. The kingdom of heaven is an invitation that's not partial – not one foot in one foot out but both feet in for the hokey cokey.

And on the other hand the parables are open to looking at it the other way around. Suppose the merchant is God in Christ who has been searching for you, for all his life, since before your creation. You are that work of grace, the finest treasure who is found by that merchant. And on finding you, is willing to sell everything, to give everything, even his life, to win you, to capture you, to situate you within the kingdom of heaven. Yes, the kingdom of heaven is about risk but it's also about realisation: realising how precious we are to God, as well as realising our role with God.

Isn't that mind-boggling for we bears of little brain! I wonder if we can ever comprehend the dimensions of the kingdom of heaven – the what, where, who and how. But if we can jump in with both feet and risk our all, it seems we just might have begun!