

Luke 13:31-end; Phil. 3:17 - 4.1; Ps.27; Gen. 15:1-12, 17-18.
Lent 2, 19th February 2016
8:00 a.m. & 10:0 a.m., St. Andrew's, Totteridge.

'Salvation as Growing Self-Awareness'

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus has been talking about God's Kingdom. He's been telling the parables of the Mustard Seed (v.13:18-19), where even the smallest, most insignificant thing can contain enormous promise; and the Parable of the Yeast (v.20-21), where the ability of the dough to rise depends on that key ingredient to be added to it. And then he answers a question about salvation, 'Lord, will only a few be saved?' - and offers the metaphor of the Narrow Door (v.22-30) where many will try to enter and will not be able.

In all three cases, he's talking about us, our relationship with God, and our ability to enter his eternal Kingdom. Our small and often-overlooked detail is our ability to learn and to grow and to change for the betterment of all, not just ourselves. The yeast we need, the key ingredient, is to find out what we need to learn most. This will often be the same characteristic whose very hiddenness consistently makes us unhappy or most uncomfortable – it's our 'blind spot' that only Christ can heal. The irony is that, because it's the thing we know least about ourselves, it's also the hardest to discover and to accept.

Our reading today concludes with Jesus expressing his lament for the children of Jerusalem, 'How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!' Jerusalem is here a symbol for all those intent on maintaining power, privilege and wealth at the expense of the children, the poor, the excluded or the incapacitated. The 'real' city of Jerusalem has become, and arguably remains to this day, a place of squabbling, confrontation

and exclusion, a place of shame. Jesus expresses his long-held desire for the children of Jerusalem, and thereby for all humanity, with that delightful maternal metaphor of a mother hen gathering her brood under her wings (v.34).

What I think he's saying, what he's been working up to, is that if we want to be truly happy and secure, if we want to enter the kingdom, then we need to keep on working out our true selves, to get to know the person God knows us to be. This is our hidden potential. This is our key ingredient. This is the way through that Narrow Door. Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, 'our citizenship is in heaven' (Phil.3.20) – the Kingdom is our true home.

Christ knows that he is the Messiah. In the wilderness of the desert he was diabolically tempted to become a false salvation, in accordance with a very worldly criteria. Power. Pride. Prestige. In short, not to be his true self; not to be the Messiah he was meant to be in his loving Father's plan (Leo Cushley). So thinking of Abram, the Father of all the 'People of the Book', we have to ask ourselves what we truly believe.

Abram's faith was considered by God as righteousness. If you believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, then you have to keep up the search for your true self, the self that Christ knows you to be, and be brave about the changes in your life that he will demand. Sticking with the wrong approach is just going to get you more and more lost.

The polar opposite of The Kingdom is, of course, Hell. The Pope has been questioned recently by those who suggest that, "The problem with Pope Francis is: he doesn't warn people about hell... he does not threaten people with damnation" (Carmody Grey *The Tablet* 20.2.16). The question doesn't take into account what Francis said to the UN in N.Y.C. recently, about how 'The yardstick we use for others will be the yardstick time uses for us.'

In other words, the vast ranks of the excluded, the marginalised, the poor, the oppressed, the forgotten, the ones who mediate to us the divine judgment, are the ones before whom we will be found innocent or guilty. And Francis has been particularly vociferous in holding up a particular group to the most stringent scrutiny: those who represent the church. So who, in Francis' eyes, is in most danger of going to hell? It is those who don't show mercy to others. He says that there is only one way of excluding oneself from God's mercy, and that is to keep it to oneself.

I agree with his point about mercy, but I don't believe in the idea of the Gates of Hell as a merciless threshold to be crossed by the sinful dead. It is for me the principle joy of what happened on that first Good Friday that our Lord and Saviour threw down those gates and opened up a path to universal salvation. Trouble is, we rebuild those gates on earth for ourselves each time we put up barriers, like Trump wants, each time we kill the prophets, each time we exercise a stone-hearted judgement. And we can drive others into a living hell too, with our various deliberate or unthinking cruelties.

But Christ's understanding of the victory he needs to bring about is summed up in his own words, '[See, your house is left to you....](#)' (v.35a). With Christ's sacrifice God's house becomes our house and we have the free will to make choices for ourselves. The route to salvation in the here and now requires that, in the name of God most high, we continually '[strive to enter the narrow door](#)', strive to work out who we truly are, strive to remedy our flaws, and strive to discover our true selves. ...[Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord](#)' (v.13:35).

Spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Luke 13:31-end The Lament over Jerusalem

31 At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.'
32 He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. 33 Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem." 34 Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 35 See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." '

Phil. 3:17-4.1

17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. 18 For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. 19 Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21 He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

4¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18. God's Covenant with Abram

15
After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' 2 But Abram said, 'O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' 3 And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' 4 But the word of the Lord came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.' 5 He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' 6 And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

7 Then he said to him, 'I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.' 8 But he said, 'O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?' 9 He said to him, 'Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.' 10 He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. 11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,