

Lord God, help us ponder how to bring heaven to earth through Jesus Christ. Amen.

- Of codfish, bindweed and horse mackerel.
- Because we've been more focused around the house this year, Helen and I have been attacking the bindweed in the garden rather more effectively than usual. It is entirely unstoppable. It is secret and underground, popping up in the most unexpected places. It is vigorous and frustrating. You pull up one shoot and another twenty appear within a few days. I'd like to say I'm waging a personal battle against it, except as usual, it is Helen who does most of the hard work.
- I hope there's not bindweed in heaven!
- What's your vision of heaven?
- Are you going to be wafting around on a cloud with the people you love? After all 1 Thessalonians 4, says *'we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever.'*
- Is it just a long rest at the end of a demanding life? For Revelation 14 says, *'Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.'* 'Yes,' says the Spirit, *'they will rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them.'*
- Or is it something more physical and active we have to look forward to? 1 Corinthians 15 says, *'Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.'*
- And is heaven just for some people or for everyone? For in our Gospel reading today, Jesus says, *'The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'* But on the other hand Paul writes in our first reading, *"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'*
- The rather enigmatic answer is 'Yes, heaven is all these, and much, much more'
- The one thing we can be absolutely sure about is that it will be where Jesus is King. Remember the wonderful words from Colossians chapter 1 which always seem to me like a huge twinkling sparkler fizzing in the darkness, *'He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.'*
- And is there such a thing as heaven on earth? Do we see glimpses of this future glory now? I think so. One of my defining bible verses is right at the beginning of Mark's Gospel, chapter 1, *'Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'*
- That's probably enough of swopping bible verses for one day. Let's see what Jesus says about it all. Jesus, who clearly believed himself to be the presence of heaven on earth. Jesus, who is still with us today, here in church, here on Zoom, here in the queue outside the pharmacy, through the power of his Holy Spirit.
- Jesus says, *'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed'*. Ah yes we know about that. Mustard seeds are tiny. Thousands in a thimble full. Heaven on earth starts with small beginnings, a baby's smile. I challenge you to tell me that a parent does not get a glimpse of heaven when they see their small child's smile of recognition. Or a 'chance' word of encouragement. Or a feeling that I should ring Martha and, when I do, discovering that she was really struggling and desperately needed someone to talk to. Or even a seriously economically focussed prime minister developing the Corona virus and realising there are broader issues to think about?
 - And the mustard seed grows. Into a huge tree. So big that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches. Small beginnings lead to Kingdom sized outcomes.
- Which is all very well, and no doubt true, but have you ever seen a mustard tree? No, because mustard plants don't grow into trees. So we have either discovered a lack of agricultural knowledge on Jesus' part or he is, once again, using hyperbole to make a point.

- In fact, in Ancient Israel it is likely that mustard plants were thought of as weeds, probably not cultivated much, and they certainly don't grow much more than a foot or two in height. So to bring the parable up to date, here it is again. *'The kingdom of heaven is like bindweed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'*
- A bindweed tree? How ridiculous. But that's what heaven is like. Secretly spreading, you can't stop it however much you try and it grows and grows and grows. Incredible. God's like that!
- The Kingdom of heaven turns the established values of the world upside down. Start with power? No. Use human skill and add fertilizer? No. Look for success? No. Cultivate the well thought of? Certainly not!
- Can you imagine a farmer going out of his way to cultivate something as 'worthless' as bindweed? You know I'm really quite glad that God uses what is considered worthless by the world for his tools. That means he is able to use me.
- And Jesus adds lots of other little vignettes about what heaven is like as well. I'll leave you to think about the points he is making and let's skip to the last one which is not oft quoted, at least in liberal Anglican circles. *'the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.'* This is distinctly more worrying! Especially if we are talking about heaven as somewhere in the future. Are you a good nourishing codfish? Or a valueless horse mackerel that so full of bones that nobody is going to bother to buy it and it just needs to be discarded?
- But what if instead of you being a single fish, you are the whole haul of fish? In that case, then when the angels come *'and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire'*, it is only the sinful aspects of your character that will be discarded. That might be quite a lot of course, but the good catch, the redeemed life, the bits you've handed to Jesus, the image of God within you, will be kept and cherished and valued in heaven.
- *'Have you understood all this?'* Does it make sense with life as we know it? We live in a world which is largely ignoring it and is becoming extremely unsettled because we don't seem to be masters of our own destiny in the way that we thought we were. In response Jesus comes out with an enigmatic little parable. *'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'*
- Believe it or not, you and I have *'been trained for the kingdom of heaven'*. We are part of the Church, the body of Christ. We have turned to follow Jesus and put him first instead of ourselves. We appreciate that the extraordinary truth of the cross and resurrection is that, although we cannot get our heads fully around it, we are valuable and loved and cherished and forgiven. And we are given the ability to see heaven on earth, the Holy Spirit in action, now, today, and it's like bindweed!
- So if you and I, the Church, are the *'scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven'*, we are once again thrown up against our calling to speak words of value to the world that is so desperately confused and hurting at the moment. What treasure can we bring out to share? What *'is new and what is old'*?
- I think that, like bindweed, neither will be especially popular!
- What is old is surely the wisdom of scripture. What is old is the revolutionary ways of the Gospel, the challenge of admitting we are not masters of creation. What is old is the possibility of turning it all round if we turn ourselves round and face Christ. More codfish than horse mackerel. And all valuable.
- What is new, today, might be our present situation. A pandemic which is remorselessly causing pain and trouble without partiality. How can God, if he really is a God of love, allow this to happen? Does he not care about my Auntie Ethel?
- And once again, I am convinced that the response to this is that it is because God does care. He cares deeply about his creation which we are systematically wrecking, and his method of saving it is to control the wreckers with natural remedies. That's the health food option! But if heaven is all it's cracked up to be, all that we've

been talking about this morning, then this is not a loss of hope for humanity, but rather a continuation of the Christian hope into the horizon of eternity.

- Or would you rather that we just continued to race headlong into the selfish destruction of the planet?
- Be proud of your faith. Stand up for Jesus. Tell people about a God for whom love is more important than anything else, and explain what they should know already, that love does not necessarily guarantee an easy or a straightforward life with no suffering and no hard choices. In fact, exactly the opposite!
- Pray about it, and don't worry if you can't find the words because the Holy Spirit has a wonderful knack of bringing order out of the chaos of our confused and anxious rambling prayers because when '*we do not know how to pray as we ought, ... that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words*', as we heard in our first reading.
- And now I can say what I've been waiting to say in Baldock for the last 16 years, to all you codfish, as you battle with expressing the bindweed of the Kingdom of heaven to a population which wants to ignore the truth, 'That's how you turn the piece of cod into the peace of God!'