



DAILY DEVOTIONS

A thought to comfort and encourage you



Light Lutheran Church

July/August 2026
Sunday 26th -Sunday 2nd

This week's Devotions are by Stephen Abraham

Stephen Abraham is a retired Lutheran pastor and musician who served as a school pastor and church planter in Mawson Lakes, South Australia. Having to retire due to a spinal injury that leaves him largely housebound with chronic pain, Stephen still preaches, takes chapel and serves his local church and school. He also writes and records personal songs, worship songs and Christian meditations, which he shares on his YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/StephenAbrahamMusic

'Reproduced with permission: Lutheran Church of Australia 2025'.





A THOUGHT TO COMFORT AND ENCOURAGE YOU LEAVE THE WEEDS TO THE MASTER

By Stephen Abraham

'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them' (Matthew 13:29).

Read [Matthew 13:24–30](#)

In Year 8 Agriculture at my high school, we were each given a plot and some cabbage seeds and told to plant the cabbages and keep the plot weed-free. In my report at the end of the semester, my teacher Mr Boerth wrote, 'Stephen struggled to keep the weeds at bay. He is no gardener!' (A bad report for the son of a farmer!)

As much as I try, I admit I'm still no gardener. Nowadays, I get help with my garden from an expert. He knows far more than I do. Sometimes I have ideas for dealing with issues in my garden and don't consult him. I inevitably do the wrong thing, which he then must correct. As much as I want to do things myself, I have to trust his expertise first.

In the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, Jesus addresses the human frustration of seeing weeds among the wheat. A farmer's field is sabotaged by an enemy who sows weeds alongside the good wheat. In first-century Palestine, this weed was likely darnel, a poisonous plant closely resembling wheat in its early stages of growth. When the master's workers eagerly offer to pull up the weeds, the master stops them with a surprising command: 'Let both grow together until the harvest.'

We make judgement calls all day long: make this or that for breakfast, check our calendars or messages, sort out this problem or prioritise another. But when it comes to God's kingdom – who is righteous, who is not, who is heaven-bound and who is not – that is not our call to make. Calling down God's judgement on people isn't our responsibility (as much as we might want to).

Do we need to confront poor behaviour respectfully? Yes. Do we need to keep people safe? Absolutely. Do we help those who need help? Of course! Do we point people to Jesus? One hundred per cent. But a person's salvation or damnation isn't our call to make – we leave that to the master.

Heavenly Master of the field, we lift our world to you. Focus us on your word and on the tasks set before us. Help us trust you with the final outcome of our world, knowing that we who are in Christ will one day shine like the sun in your kingdom. Amen.

Stephen Abraham is a retired Lutheran pastor and musician who served as a school pastor and church planter in Mawson Lakes, South Australia. Having to retire due to a spinal injury that leaves him largely housebound with chronic pain, Stephen still preaches, takes chapel and serves his local church and school. He also writes and records personal songs, worship songs and Christian meditations, which he shares on his YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/StephenAbrahamMusic

A THOUGHT TO COMFORT AND ENCOURAGE YOU



WHEN THE HUNTER IS HUNTED!

By Stephen Abraham

And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever (Isaiah 25:7,8a).

Read [Isaiah 25:7-9](#)

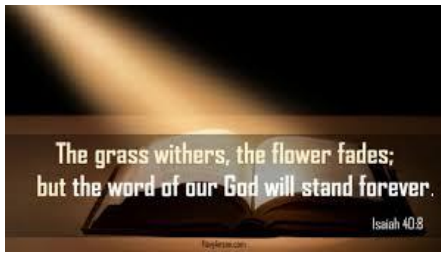
Spoiler alert! In the final chapter of the classic nail-biting blockbuster film *Jurassic Park*, our heroes are being hunted by a pair of relentless, intelligent, nine-foot-tall killer dinosaurs: the velociraptors.

Despite all their efforts to escape, the survivors are finally cornered in the park's main exhibit – and about to be eaten alive by these invincible killing machines. Just as one pounces, the mighty 'king of lizards' – the *Tyrannosaurus rex* (*T. rex*) – bursts into the room, snatching the leaping velociraptor out of mid-air with its jaws. The *T. rex* finishes off the second velociraptor, finally letting out a massive, triumphant roar inside the rotunda, letting all know: 'I am the king of the dinosaurs.' The End.

In the ancient cultures of Old Testament times, death was often thought of as a great mouth swallowing people whole. We hear it mentioned several times in Scripture, like in the rebellion of Korah in Numbers 16:32, which records that 'the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up'. Here in Isaiah 25:8, at the end of time, reality is flipped – the King of Heaven swallows up the swallower! (Kind of like the *T. rex* in *Jurassic Park* taking out the velociraptors). Paul also mentions this in 1 Corinthians 15:54b when talking about the triumphant resurrection of the dead: '... then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."'

What a powerful image – the King of Heaven destroying death itself. It's no wonder the response is worship in Isaiah 25:9: 'Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.' *Almighty God, King of the Universe, we look forward with bated breath to this amazing time – the end of death, the end of suffering. As we wait, and as we suffer this side of eternity, Lord Jesus, cry with us and wipe away our tears in readiness for that great day of days: the day of our eternal salvation. Amen*

A THOUGHT TO COMFORT AND ENCOURAGE YOU



VIEWING EARTH FROM ETERNITY

By Stephen Abraham

He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers (Isaiah 40:22a).

Read [Isaiah 40:12–17,21–24](#)

As a space enthusiast and a Christian, I'm fascinated by the experiences of astronauts who have gone to space, seen the entire small blue dot of the Earth laid out before them and had a profound religious experience. It is so common that philosopher Frank White coined the term the 'Overview Effect' in 1987. This phenomenon occurs when humans view Earth from this extreme distance and experience feelings of universal interconnectedness, overwhelming awe and an appreciation for a Creator. Several astronauts have become Christians or returned to their faith as a result of this experience.

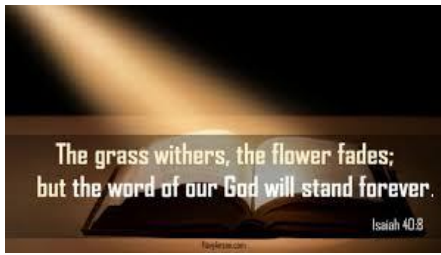
From God's perspective, the entire Earth – and all its overwhelming problems – is remarkably small. Isaiah uses breathtaking, poetic imagery to zoom out from our daily anxieties and ground our hearts in the absolute supremacy of the God who 'measures the oceans in his hands'. When we feel overwhelmed by the shifting sands of our lives, Isaiah invites us to look at them from an eternal perspective.

Verses 13 and 14 remind us that God answers to no one. He requires no counsellor, no teacher and no advisor. In a world full of experts, breaking news and constant opinions, God stands alone in perfect wisdom. He does not need our help to figure out a solution to our struggles, nor is he surprised by global events. To him, the nations and their intimidating political powers are like a drop in a bucket.

When your world feels chaotic, remember that God is Almighty; he is vastly greater than anything you will face. You do not need to carry the weight of the world, because it is already held safely in his hands. Bring your smallness to his greatness today, and know that for Jesus' sake, you can find rest in his care.

Heavenly Father, when the world feels overwhelming and my problems feel like mountains, help me to remember your immense greatness. Forgive me for the times I let fear and anxiety rule my heart. I lift up the burdens I am carrying and place them into your hands. Remind me that nothing is too big for you to handle. Give me peace as I step out in faith, trusting that you are holding my world together. In Jesus' name, Amen

A THOUGHT TO COMFORT AND ENCOURAGE YOU



WHERE THE GRASS IS GREENER, THERE IS ALWAYS A CATCH

By Stephen Abraham

But the king rebelled against him by sending his envoys to Egypt to get horses and a large army. Will he succeed? Will he who does such things escape? Will he break the

treaty and yet escape? (Ezekiel 17:15)

Read [Ezekiel 17:1–15](#)

A parable involving two great eagles, a vine and a cedar tree. This prophecy represents the history of Judah's political manoeuvring. Its lesson reaches across millennia and straight into our hearts, reminding us of the dangers of misplaced trust and switching allegiances when the going gets tough.

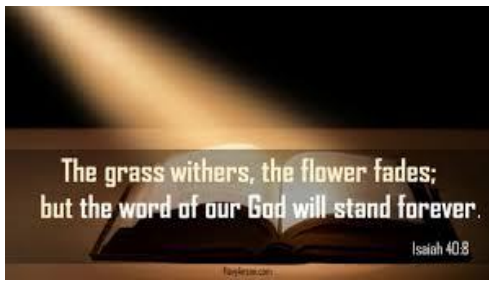
The story describes a great eagle that takes the top of a cedar tree and plants a vine in fertile soil. This vine grows, but it soon bends its roots toward a second eagle, seeking water and protection rather than relying on the soil where it was originally planted. God asks a piercing question: 'Will it thrive? Will it not be uprooted and wither?' The vine represents King Zedekiah and the people of Judah. God had placed them in a position to survive under Babylon, but they broke their covenant and turned to Egypt for help. They looked away from God's provision and sought security in another alliance.

How often are we (or those we know) tempted to do the same? Something or someone upsets us in our community, but rather than working through the issues, we become disgruntled. Suddenly, the grass looks greener somewhere else. When difficulty comes, it is tempting to 'bend our roots' toward other securities – a new place of work, a different church, a fresh school, a more attractive community. We convince ourselves that these 'new eagles' will nurture us exactly the way we want them to.

Don't get me wrong, there are times when God calls us to new circumstances. But it's worth asking: 'Is this what God wants, or is this what I want?' When these questions come, remember the vine in Ezekiel's riddle and the danger of turning away from the place where God has planted you. True stability does not come from shifting trust based on our whims; it comes from God's faithfulness and trusting alone in his will for our lives.

Heavenly Father, I confess that when life gets difficult, I look elsewhere for security and comfort. Forgive me for the times I turn my heart away from you. Anchor my soul deeply in your love, truth and grace. Guide me with the tough conversations I need to have. Give me the strength to rely on your power alone so that I may grow, endure and thrive. In Jesus' name, Amen

A THOUGHT TO COMFORT AND ENCOURAGE YOU



A QUESTION I DON'T WANT TO ASK MYSELF

By Stephen Abraham

Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time? (Luke 12:56)

Read [Luke 12:54–59](#)

In Luke 12, the crowds have gathered to hear Jesus' message. But rather than go easy on them, Jesus goes hard! He confronts their hypocrisy that they follow the local weather patterns – that clouds in the west predict rain blowing in off the Mediterranean Sea, and if south winds blow, there will be scorching heat off the Negev desert – but they completely fail to interpret the significance of the present time – of what is coming and who is speaking to them. As I picture the scene in my head, I'm so amazed at how blunt and gutsy Jesus is. I've spoken at some pretty big school and community events with large crowds. Yet I cannot imagine walking out in front of a large group of people who've come to hear me speak and starting off by calling them hypocrites! Man, that is something else! And now for the kicker, a question I don't really want to ask: Am I a hypocrite? Am I too comfortable in this life – too absorbed with the temporal to not see the eternal? Am I so focused on my little kingdom that I am oblivious to God's kingdom? Am I so busy focusing on my practical needs that I'm missing the bigger spiritual picture and the physical and spiritual needs of my neighbours? Am I too comfortable and spiritually lazy? Ouch. Lord Jesus, that's going to take some time to unpack.

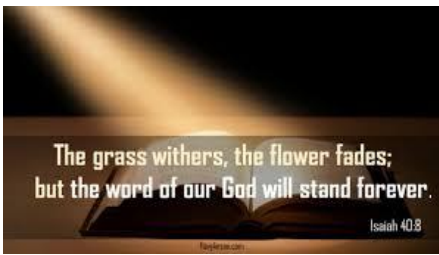
After this verbal barrage, Jesus then shifts to a sobering legal analogy. He warns the hearers to settle matters with their adversary quickly while on the way to court. Otherwise, they will be dragged before the judge, handed over to the officer and thrown into prison until every last penny is paid. Okay, Jesus. I get it! The time to get my spiritual house in order is right now. Time to be honest with you. Time to confess and repent.

Lord Jesus, you know my heart. You know my failings. You know how focused I am on the things of this world – my own creature comforts and trying to make this temporary place 'heaven' while I should be focused on 'actual heaven'. I chicken out on starting faith conversations with my neighbours. I avoid your call to be your envoy at work and at home. I have no excuse. Holy Spirit, turn this heart around. Turn my eyes to you. Forgive me for Jesus' sake. Renew in me a willing spirit. Set me on the path you have for me. Open my eyes to what is going on spiritually around me today. Make me bold to speak your truth to others. Amen.

A THOUGHT TO COMFORT AND ENCOURAGE YOU

IS GOD SANTA CLAUS?

By Stephen Abraham



The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Read [1 Corinthians 1:18–25](#)

On YouTube, there is a fascinating debate between an atheist Professor Dap Hartmann of Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands versus the famous Christian apologist Professor John Lennox of Oxford. In it, Professor Lennox responds to Hartmann, who compared God to Santa Claus. John's response: 'I'm not convinced about comparing God with Santa Claus ... because have you ever met an adult who *came* to believe in Santa Claus?'

The text for today is a profound paradox. Paul reminds us that what the world labels as weakness and foolishness is actually the display of God's ultimate power and wisdom. In Western culture, we demand logical answers, faultless strategies and undeniable physical proof. (Isn't it fascinating that in Paul's time, people sought the same things as we do!) The Greeks chased logical reasoning, while the Jews demanded miraculous signs. A crucified Saviour does not fit into either of these moulds. To the intellectual, a Messiah on a cross seemed utterly absurd; to the religious elite, it was a sign of God's complete absence, not his divine presence.

Later in the debate, John Lennox shares that his own reason for believing in God is twofold. Firstly, God hasn't hidden himself. He's revealed himself in space–time in history through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Secondly, God doesn't force his way into our thinking. God came into the world in such a way that did not threaten people. Not in a colossal display of power, but almost incognito, so the people could get to know him and see his love.

You cannot get people to accept the truth by force, so another way is required, and the incarnation is the way God chose to do it. God deliberately bypassed human expectations. He chose to come through the life of a human being and to completely conquer sin and death in humility, pain and the seeming weakness of the cross.

Lord Jesus, thank you for revealing yourself to the world in such an intimate and personal way. You defeated sin and death for me. Help me share that good news with someone close to me today. Amen.

A THOUGHT TO COMFORT AND ENCOURAGE YOU



WHAT'S IN A WORD?

By Stephen Abraham

The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple (Psalm 119:130).

Read [Psalm 119:129–136](#)

When you think of God's word, what comes to mind? (Think for a second before you read on ... maybe write down your response.)

I seldom refer to the collection of 66 books as 'The Bible' – especially when preaching or leading worship. I have two reasons for this. The first is that it's often used in a phrase I've come to dislike: 'The Bible says ...' When I visit any denomination of Christian church and hear this phrase, I tend to recoil because that phrase has often been used by preachers to either take a single verse out of context to prove a point (proof texting), or it's been used in a moralistic/legalistic 'law-only' sense without the gospel (and trying to obey the law doesn't get me to heaven!).

My second reason is that 'The Bible' is a secular term. By that, I mean that anybody – a Christian, an atheist scholar or a person of another religion – can refer to the 66 books as 'The Bible'. To me, however, it is much more than just a collection of ancient writings; it is 'Scripture' – *the* sacred writing. Or it is 'God's word' – what God has actually said to humanity. To me, that distinction matters, and it is my faith statement referring to the Bible in that way. (Now, are you obliged to do the same as me? Of course not, but hopefully this makes you think!)

Now read Psalm 119:129–136.

Did you count how many different words are used in this text for 'God's word'? One of the joys of using a Bible app is that it is so easy to compare translations and see how each treats the original language (and it's a simple way to do your own Bible study). In the NIV, you get 'statutes', 'word/words', 'commands', 'law', 'precepts' and 'decrees'. It was one of my professors who taught me that in the psalms, all of these can be thought of as synonyms for God's word, because for the Israelites, the first five books of the Bible – often referred to as 'the law' – *were* God's word for them. This really helped me when I read these legal command-like terms in the psalms. All of them simply refer to God's word.

Almighty God, thank you for your word. It convicts me, challenges me, shares your grace and heals my heart. Open my eyes to your word each day. May it always light my path. Amen.

A THOUGHT TO COMFORT AND ENCOURAGE YOU



WHAT IS THE TREASURE?

By Sue Smith

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field (Matthew 13:44).

Read [Matthew 13:31–33,44–52](#)

The kingdom of heaven is mentioned six times in today's passage. You know when God wants to get a message across; he puts it on repeat. Jesus also shares the message in a series of parables. Parables are relatable stories drawn from everyday life. They are usually short, succinct and easy to remember. But Jesus uses them to challenge and invite reflection on multiple levels. In the parables, Jesus asks us not just to dip our toes in the water but also to wade in and enter the ocean of deeper meaning ... which has no boundaries. 'Have you understood all this?' Jesus asks in verse 51.

I've often read these parables and thought I understood them – at least on the surface. They appear in great concentration and then are over in no time. So, the 'treasure hidden in a field' ... is it Jesus? Do we believers need to do the work of finding Jesus as our treasure and then securing the field so that this treasure is not lost? Would we sell everything to obtain the field? Could we be relied upon to do this? By our human nature, we have put ourselves at the centre of this parable. But what happens if we turn it around?

The kingdom of heaven is the treasure here. What if the man is actually Jesus, who has found the kingdom of heaven – the kingdom being of the body of believers? Jesus has found his treasure in us, the church – his bride. In full joy, he then takes all the required steps to secure the treasure – by burying it and selling all he owns to return and buy it as his own. This is what Jesus did in making the ultimate sacrifice of dying to redeem us as his own.

That's a very different understanding of this parable from what most of us are used to: it turns it on its head! We are the treasure so valued by God that he would send Jesus to restore us to himself. Imagine that!

Lord God, we praise you for your all-encompassing love for us and for how you seek us out as your treasure to redeem. Help us to know your saving love in every aspect of our lives and that through the Holy Spirit, we might experience and pass on the joy that comes with being in union with you. Amen.

Sue Smith recently retired from the oil industry and lives with her husband, Peter, in Port Macquarie NSW. She enjoys knitting, the gym and ocean swimming. She serves in her local St Peters congregation and on the LCANZ's Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions (CSBQ).

Sermon for Proper 12A

Text: 1 Kings 3:5-12 Theme: “What do you need?”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today's sermon explores what we can learn from King Solomon, looking at selected verses from our Old Testament reading:

⁵ *Yahweh appeared to Solomon at Gibeon in a dream at night, and God said, “Ask what I should give to you.”* ⁹ *“Give to your servant a listening heart to judge your people, to discern between good and bad, because who is able to judge this, your difficult people?”*

¹⁰ *The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this.* ¹¹ *So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice,* ¹² *I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.* (NIV)

Lord sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

A pastor, a vicar, and a congregation chairperson were walking to their board meeting when they stumbled across an old, brass lamp. The pastor picks up the lamp, wipes off the dust and, sure enough, a genie appears in a cloud of purple smoke! Grateful to be set free, the genie offers each of them one wish.

The pastor doesn't need any time to decide: “I **want** to retire early to a multi-million-dollar mansion in the tropics”, he says. The genie snaps its fingers, and poof! The pastor is gone.

The vicar needs a bit longer to decide before saying: “I **want** to be the pastor of a megachurch with thousands of followers.” And, hey presto, he too is gone.

The genie then turns to the chairperson and asks, “What about you?” At this the chairperson scowls and says, “I **need** those two slackers back here this instant!”

At first glance, the story from 1 Kings may seem to be like this genie joke. The Lord suddenly appears to Solomon in a dream and says, “Ask what I should give you.” But that's where the similarity ends. Solomon doesn't ask for what he **wants**, but for what he **needs**.

For those who may not know Solomon's history, he was the son of the great King David and his wife Bathsheba. Although he was not David's eldest son, he was chosen to succeed David. After David's death (and some altercations with his brothers) Solomon ascended to the throne of Israel.

Nevertheless, like many new rulers, he felt that his position was rather precarious, and he realised he had big shoes to fill. He admits as much to God in 1 Kings 3:7-8:

“Now, Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties.

Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number.”

When God offers Solomon what seems like a genie wish, the new king doesn't ask for his heart's desire, such as money or fame. He doesn't even ask for his immediate needs, such as protection from very real enemies. Instead, Solomon asks for what he truly needs: a “listening heart.” He asks for a heart which can hear God speaking clearly to him.

In Hebrew, as in English, the heart is more than just an organ that pumps blood. The heart is the centre of a person's being; the source of emotion, motivation, and action. In asking for a “listening heart,” Solomon is asking for his whole being to be attuned to God. He wants to listen to God speaking to him so that he can act in accordance with what God knows is best; for him and for the people he governs. Solomon wants to listen to God so that he can act with wisdom.

God is pleased with Solomon's request because He seeks first and foremost a relationship with all people. He wants to give them good *things*, yes; but the best they can receive are not inanimate objects but rather God's living presence in their lives. God wants to be at the centre of people's lives so that He can love, support, and guide them in all things and at all times.

So when Solomon asks for a “listening heart,” he is asking for God in his heart, at the centre of his being. And God is pleased to give Solomon the things he **needs**, such as wisdom to rule God's people, and even some of the things he **wants**, such as wealth and fame. Even today, Solomon is famed for his wisdom, as demonstrated in subsequent chapters of 1 Kings.

That's great for Solomon, but what does it mean for us? God doesn't come to us with a similar offer, does he? *Or does he?*

When Jesus teaches His disciples how to pray in Luke 11, He invites them to ask for whatever they need and promises God will give it to them. And God gives it as a gift, because He wants to; not because they deserve it. God extends this same offer to all Christians, which is why we regularly pray the Lord's Prayer. In the Lord's Prayer we are lead to pray for our “daily bread” (for all the things we need to sustain us from day-to-day).

But Jesus also explains through various examples that God isn't a genie who promises to give us anything we want. Rather, He wants to guide us to our Heavenly Father, who is genuinely concerned about our welfare. From Luke 11:11-13 we learn:

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (NIV)

Like most loving earthly fathers, God wants to give His children good things, so He invites them to ask. But He won't give us what is not in our best interest, or what might harm other people.

If God is not like a genie, and puts limits on His wish fulfilment, how then do we know what to pray for? For a start, we can be confident in praying for a “listening heart”. God's first priority is for us to know Him intimately. Not, as some people think, to boss

us around, but to help us as He helped Solomon. God wants to assure us of His love and favour, of an eternal future with Him. He wants to guide us around the mistakes we make because of our stupidity or selfishness, and help us withstand the problems created by others.

That last point is particularly important, because Solomon's story ends on a cautionary note. While his reign started off wonderfully, it didn't finish so well. In 1 Kings 11:1,2,4 we are told:

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. (NIV)

Sadly (over time) Solomon's listening heart became deaf to God's voice, and after his death his fabulously prosperous and peaceful kingdom was torn in two.

Solomon's story reminds us that our relationship with God is not a static thing. We don't just pray once and "that's it". Rather, as our hearts are bruised by our own selfishness or the selfishness of others; as they become burdened by greed or grudges or worries in life, we need to keep on coming back to God. We need to ask Him for the regular renewal of His Holy Spirit to help us in our weakness; to heal our hurts and strengthen our trust in God and His promises.

Like Solomon we need a "listening heart". But not just once; we need a listening heart continually. So Jesus encourages us to pray for the gift of God's Holy Spirit, today and every day. And He assures us that we can be confident that God will grant that request, because God never stops listening to us. When our heart's desire is God to be the centre of our lives, we can be sure that He will come to us and live with us.

Through God's Holy Spirit our hearts will become receptive to God's Word. The Holy Spirit takes Jesus' promises and helps us to understand and trust in them, and provides guidance when we, like Solomon, don't know which way to turn. Even more, as we heard in the reading from Romans 8:26, the Holy Spirit helps us to pray when we don't know what to ask for (when we don't know what we really need). Indeed, the Holy Spirit even prays on our behalf, so that we not only receive the things we need, but even, sometimes, the things we want. When we recognise that our most fundamental need is for God, He will not only fulfil that need but give us everything else we need as well.

Amen.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Sermon for Proper 12A

The Text: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

“Jesus told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field’” (v31).

The game of Charades is an acting game in which one player acts out a word or phrase, often by miming similar-sounding words. The other players try and guess the word or phrase. The idea is to use physical rather than verbal language to convey the meaning to another party. The game of Charades can be very frustrating for both parties, especially if you are either struggling to be understood or struggling to understand. If you have played the game, chances are you have experienced both sides of the equation.

The game aside, you might have carried out a charade in a real-life situation – such as when you tried to find a toilet in a non-English speaking country.

We probably use charades more than we realise, given that a large percentage of communication is non-verbal. Apparently only 7% of our communication is conveyed through actual words, whilst the rest comes through the tone of our voice, facial expressions, gestures, posture and other non-verbal forms. Anyone who is married will know how just a look from your spouse can convey a whole world of meaning without any words needing to be said.

In our Gospel reading for today Jesus uses a series of parables (pictures or images from everyday life that teach about spiritual realities) in an endeavour to describe to his listeners what the kingdom of heaven is like. The attempts of Jesus to explain it made me think of this game of Charades. Jesus is teaching and his disciples and the crowds are struggling to understand. The reason for this confusion comes from a language barrier. But it is not a normal language barrier.

The problem was not the linguistic differences between speaking Aramaic, Hebrew or Greek—the predominant languages spoken in Israel at that time. Jesus was not restricted to using physical rather than verbal language to convey his meaning. The real language barrier was the gulf separating heaven and earth, the divine and the human. How does one begin to describe the kingdom of heaven to those who are so accustomed to the kingdoms of this earth? You can’t use the normal language and descriptors because they just don’t apply. The kingdom of heaven is *not* like the kingdoms (nations/countries) of this earth.

So, what is it like? How would *you* describe the kingdom of heaven to others? What words or images would you use to unpack God’s eternal truths in a temporal context? We have a tendency to think of it in expansive and elaborate terms. Surely God’s heavenly kingdom must be significantly greater than our experience of this world’s kingdoms. So we might speak of it in terms of how it far exceeds anything we can possibly imagine—it is bigger and better and brighter.

But the kingdom of heaven is *not* like the kingdoms of this earth. It is not simply a bigger and better and brighter version of what we experience here on this earth. It can't be adequately described by adding a few adverbs and some other superlatives to emphasize its magnificence.

Jesus surprises us in the way he describes the kingdom of heaven. He surprises us in the parables he tells to convey its true meaning. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, it is like yeast, it is like treasure hidden in a field, it is like a pearl of great value and it is like a net that was let down into the lake. These are very ordinary images that are used to describe what must be the most extraordinary of truths—God's heavenly kingdom.

A mustard seed!? Yeast!? Hidden treasure!? A single pearl!? A fishing net!? Surely not! Surely such things can't possibly do justice to the task of painting a picture of the kingdom of heaven!

But this is the picture that is painted by the one who should know what the kingdom of heaven is like. Jesus is the Son of God who came from heaven to reside with us here on this earth. He did it in order to bridge the gap between the two.

And Jesus uses that which is unimpressive to impress upon us how distinctive God's kingdom of heaven is from our normal experiences of the kingdoms of this earth.

And it needs to be distinctive and different. For—let's face it—we have had how-ever many thousands of years to build our own kingdoms and nations and what have we accomplished? Have we found an answer to the issues we face? Have we managed to establish a strong enough, big enough and successful enough kingdom to combat poverty and greed and violence and sickness and death? We live in a world where the different kingdoms can't live at peace with each other. At any time in history conflicts are waged between kingdoms and nations, where they try to exert their strength. The kingdom of heaven is not like this—it is not like a bigger, more powerful version of what we already have. We don't need that.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that is planted in a field. It seems small and insignificant, just as the word of God that is sown in a person's life seems the same. But that seed grows to become a plant that provides respite, just as God's word grows in a person to produce good works that will bring blessings to the earth.

So, the kingdom of heaven is seen at work when one person chooses to forgive a wrong done to them rather than harbour feelings of anger and revenge.

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that is mixed into a large batch of flour. The yeast is hidden in that flour but it works all the way through it in such a way that all the flour is impacted by it. Likewise, the kingdom of heaven is not restricted by any border or limits established by the nations of this earth. It transcends cultural, political and geographical divides and defies any attempts to restrict its influence.

So, the kingdom of heaven is at work even in those kingdoms where Christianity has been outlawed, though its true influence may be hidden from view for a time.

And even though the kingdom of heaven is described in ordinary terms it is still beyond all earthly value. It is like that treasure hidden in a field and like that pearl of great value. That value is not always easily and instantly recognised, but when it is, there is nothing

on this earth to compare to it. Both men in the parables sold everything they had in order to attain what they had now found.

So it is with those who receive the kingdom of heaven. Their world view and system of values is altered completely because they find true worth in God's blessings.

King Solomon understood this. In our Old Testament reading (1 Kings 3:5-12) Solomon was presented with an incredible offer from God: *'Ask for whatever you want me to give you'*. He didn't ask for wealth or long life or for power over his enemies—all things that our world might place a high value on. Instead Solomon asked for a discerning heart and the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. Above everything else he wanted God's values in his life and this was considered to be a truly wise approach to life.

In addition to being given the wisdom he requested, God promised to give him wealth and honour as well—because all things are God's to give.

And that is why *'the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish'*. Regardless of what the kingdoms of this earth claim as their own and regardless of whether people choose to acknowledge the sovereignty of God or not, it does not alter the fact that God's kingdom is an all-pervading one.

We don't have to enforce the kingdom of heaven on this earth because, as the Psalmist declares, the earth is already 'the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it' (Psalm 24:1). In the Lord's Prayer we pray: "Your kingdom come". But Martin

Luther said in his explanation of this prayer: "Indeed, the kingdom of God comes of itself even without our prayer; but we pray in this petition that it may come to us also".

The kingdom of heaven to which we belong is full of surprises. It is not like what we might often expect or even want at times. But despite the way it is hidden in the little and ordinary things, it continues to grow—in us and in all the earth.

Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He demonstrated what the kingdom of heaven is like, not only through his parables, but also through his actions.

The kingdom of heaven is like a King who was hung on a cross by his own people to die. There is not a lot to impress us about that image but through this sacrifice Jesus has conquered sin and death and has brought us into the kingdom of heaven.

May we continue to explore the truths of God's kingdom of heaven through his Son, Jesus, and may we come to see how the kingdom, the power and the glory are his, now and forever. Amen.