



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, August 4, 2002
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

*Choral Eucharist
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Park McD. Bodie

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REMEMBERING THE KINGDOM

Our Lord begins this parable as he does many others with the phrase, “The kingdom of heaven...” He then describes a new way of living which is available to all who hear it. This new way of living is one in which the hearer is invited to human relationships of grace and trust founded in the God who has repeatedly made himself known as long-suffering and steadfast in his love toward his people. These relations then are characterized by a participation in the life of the God who we hear described in the first of today’s readings. “...your sovereignty over all causes you to spare all...Through such works you have taught your people that the righteous must be kind...” In the kingdom described in this and other parables, then, the followers of Jesus will remember and embody the mercy and kindness they have discovered and received in their encounter with God in his Christ.

So much of the way we are accustomed to living, however, depends not on our ability to remember, but on our ability to forget. We exercise a selective amnesia in order to permit ourselves to disregard the dignity and well being of others in order to feel secure and safe. Similarly, in order to have that feeling of certainty about things, of having been “right” or “correct”, we must forget God’s mercy in our dealings with others. Often we use religious teachings or language to enable our forgetfulness. This is why in the Bible we find a record of God’s insistence that we remember who we are, who God is, what has been done for us, and how very much mercy we have received. We all too often permit ourselves to forget that “the righteous must be kind.”

I was on retreat in April, and one of the leaders referred to a contemporary poet’s phrase, “in the place where we are right no garden can grow.” It made me think immediately of the parable we are considering this morning and the remembering it demands of us. As I read and meditated on this parable an even more immediate image of forgetfulness and the violence it permits came to mind. It is the image of the fire at the school for girls in Saudi Arabia which was in the news earlier this year.

Let me refresh our memories of that event, but first, let us be clear that this is much more than a cautionary tale about Islam. Things like this happen in any religious culture. Just think about the genocide in Rwanda not so long ago in which Christians (Anglicans even) participated. Now on to the tragedy in Saudi Arabia. A school for girls had been established in what was apparently an apartment building. A small fire broke out, and when the girls attempted to leave the building, they found the exit doors locked. Bystanders who attempted to help the girls were prevented by religious police who objected on the grounds that the girls might not be properly covered as is the custom there. Some of the girls died before the regular police overcame the religious police. As I said, this sort of thing is not confined to Islam, but this incident makes the point the Lord Jesus was making not only in this parable but in his life, death and resurrection, that we who have encountered God

and found new life in him have a choice to live in a new way. That way is the way of fidelity over purity, of pardon over revenge, of love over law. Of remembering over forgetfulness.

When we remain in that recollection, the kingdom has a way of breaking through all our fear driven violence, and the risen Christ appears in his triumph over death when it does. Our presence here is a sign of that kingdom for we are here to be changed into the image of Christ who is the image of the Father of whom the Book of Wisdom says, "Although you are sovereign in strength, you judge in mildness, and with great forbearance you govern us." This is what Saint Paul is getting at when he says "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God." Those secular police who finally opened the door of the school remembered God the compassionate. The men and women who gather here every Saturday to make sandwiches for the homeless remember the One who said, "I am the living bread." Each time we choose to give another the benefit of a doubt we remember the One whose judgment is merciful and the kingdom draws near.

In last year's novel by Remy Rougeau, *All We Know of Heaven*, a young Trappist monk goes to his confessor greatly troubled by many things. He ends his confession saying, "Am I worthy?" The confessor responds, "None of us is worthy. God has called us and we have no choice but to respond." Later, when the community elects the brother to life vows, he brings these troubles to the attention of the Abbot. "A moment went by and the Abbot looked at his watch. 'Yes,' he said, 'Each of us has his burden to bear. Listen, Brother, it's getting late. You'd best get to bed.'"

These two little exchanges illustrate the way to remain recollected, to remember and incarnate the kingdom. This is what Jesus asks of his followers in this morning's parable of the wheat and the tares. This is our hope in Christ, that we can in him become those children of God, those righteous ones who shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father.