

## **Keble Mass St Stephen's Mt Waverley 14<sup>th</sup> July 2005**

*Proverbs 3.13-26 Psalm 25 Matthew 13.10-17*

Sermon by Elizabeth J. Smith

There's a lot of "us" and "them" in Matthew 13, a lot of "haves" and "have-nots.". Firstly, there's "us" who get it and "them" who don't. The disciples say to Jesus about the crowds: "Why do you talk to them in parables?" And Jesus' answer reinforces the disciples' sense of being different. The disciples are the "haves" to whom the secrets and mysteries of the kingdom of heaven have been so beautifully and poetically and parabolically given. The crowds are the "have-nots" left out in the dark.

And how good it is to know that we, too, are the "haves;" we are disciples who get it. Jesus says, "Blessed are your eyes, for you see, and your ears, for you hear." Blessed are we, for we are still discovering new delights in the parables of Matthew 13. Blessed are we, for we rejoice in prayer and baptism and eucharist, all the secrets of the kingdom of heaven! Blessed are we, for we are rich in the Spirit's gifts, faith and discipleship and the treasures of Wisdom who is more precious than jewels! We are blessed indeed.

So, if you don't mind me asking, why do I so often hear us running a rather different version of the "haves" and the "have-nots"? How come we slip into "poor little us" and "nasty big them"? For example, nasty big secularism of contemporary society against poor little faithful remnant of Christians; nasty big church bureaucracy against poor little faithful remnant of hardworking parishioners and clergy; nasty big Hillsong music trend against poor little faithful fans of choir anthems and pipe organ accompaniment; nasty big evangelical push against poor little faithful remnant of Catholic-minded community. It does bother me that we so easily shrink and shrivel ourselves down to something quite small and pitiful, even though Jesus has told us how blessed we are to have been given the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.

And at this point we run into a third possible version of the "haves" and "have-nots." In this version, the "haves" would be the honoured forefathers (and of course they all were forefathers!) of the Oxford Movement, and the "have-nots" would be their spiritual great-great-grandchildren, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century catholic Christians. On nights like tonight, when we look back to founding and formative moments, the risk is again that we will focus on how glorious they were, and how threadbare we may be feeling.

This is not for a minute to put down Keble and the others in that great 19<sup>th</sup>-century flourishing of Anglican Christian life. First, I love it that Keble was a poet. In fact his book of poems, "The Christian Year," was one of the great publishing success stories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. People bought it in dozens of different editions, and read and memorised it and slept with it on their bedside tables. If they'd had refrigerators in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there would have been Keble poems on their fridges the way we have Leunig cartoons on ours. In terms of spirituality, it was Keble's poetry, rather than his preaching or theology, that touched huge numbers of Anglicans. We just sang an adapted version of one of his poems, in "Blest are the pure in heart."

Another of the characters I love from the period is John Mason Neale. Neale was younger than Keble, but they died in the same year, 1866. Neale was a Cambridge man, and he wanted to see the beautiful doctrinal insights of the Oxford men translated into beautiful worship. He was also a historian of the Orthodox Church, and a very talented linguist and classicist who translated things from Greek to English to Latin and back again, for fun. He was very influential in the other publishing sensation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: Hymns Ancient and Modern. We sing many of Neale's translations still today, such as tonight's "Of the Father's love begotten."

But John Mason Neale was more than an antiquarian. He was a church architecture buff and an advocate for beauty in worship. He was behind the upsurge in neo-Gothic church design in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which I can just about forgive him on account of he took an actual hatchet to box pews. If he came to St Stephen's Mount Waverley or St John's Benteleigh today, though he wouldn't find any neo-gothic, I think he would approve of the high ceilings, and he would delight in the vestments, the music, the care for language, and the decidedly non-Puritan passion to make things beautiful.

I also like it that both John Keble and John Mason Neale were keen supporters of the revival of religious vocations for women in the Church of England. Neale founded the Society of St Margaret, a convent for women which in time was headed by one of his own daughters.

But we must not let our admiration for these 19<sup>th</sup>-century luminaries make us feel impoverished about our own membership and leadership. By all means let's recognise the Oxford Movement's high achievements, aesthetic inheritance, theological sophistication, political and ecclesiastical courage. But note also what else Matthew 13 has Jesus saying to the disciples.

"Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it." It's this idea that John Mason Neale echoes in "Of the Father's love begotten:"

*This is he whom seers and sages sang of old with one accord,  
whom the voices of the prophets promised in their faithful word;  
now he shines, the long-expected: let creation praise its Lord  
evermore and evermore.*

Now, "blessed are your eyes, for they see what many longed to see, but did not" is also true of us today, relative to John Keble and John Mason Neale and the whole host of righteous people who have gone before us.

What exactly do we have today, that Keble or Neale might possibly have longed for?

We have more poetry than ever in our liturgy, as Prayer Books and contemporary liturgical creativity honour not just the glories of 16<sup>th</sup> century English prose but the language and images of 21<sup>st</sup> century Australian word-painting.

We have more hymnody than ever in our worship, a superb recent and continuing flourishing of words and music to carry the message of faith and the spirit of prayer; a flourishing of superb hymnody which is still going on today. So we're not just singing the 19<sup>th</sup> century tonight; we're singing the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the early 21<sup>st</sup> as well.

We have more architectural innovation than ever, as more parishes take a literal or metaphorical axe to pews, and invest significant sums of money into making our church interiors practical and flexible and beautiful for contemporary liturgy.

We have more solid theology than ever being done, and by more people, not just in polemic against Rome or secularism or Puritanism, but in wonderful collegial and ecumenical conversation in places like Trinity College at the United Faculty of Theology.

And we see more women's ministries than ever, not just in contemplative prayer and social service, but in preaching, teaching, scholarship, and priestly and pastoral authority.

We have a great abundance of good gifts from God, and it is vital that we thank God wholeheartedly for them. We can't really tell what John Mason Neale would really think of today's hymns, today's prayers, today's wide liturgical spaces and abstract and minimalist aesthetic? We can only speculate about what any of the Oxford Movement luminaries would think of the preacher tonight looking as much like a 19<sup>th</sup>-century priest as possible – with the obvious exception of her gender. (Choir habit covers a multitude of fashion changes in ecclesiastical haberdashery, but the earrings are a dead giveaway.) We can only wonder what John Keble would make of the fact that this particular woman's ordination as a deacon in the Church took place on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March in 1987, which now in the Australian Anglican calendar is Keble's own feast day? Perhaps when we all get to meet in Jerusalem the golden, we'll find out! But in the meantime, tonight's anniversary does not give us licence for nostalgia for some distant Anglo-Catholic "good old days." Instead, tonight we are called to give God our thanks and praise for all the blessings that we have in our own day been receiving. Tonight we accept afresh our calling to be the people who are building tomorrow's Church. Tonight is for adventurous, eschatologically-oriented catholic Anglicans.

Which brings us to the remaining possible version of the "haves" and "have-nots" in tonight's gospel reading. In Matthew 13, Jesus has a warning, and it goes like this: "To those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have not, even what they have will be taken away."

If we indulge in the “poor little us” mentality as catholic Christians, we run the risk of losing the little we admit to having. If we cultivate a culture of scarcity in our common life, we run the risk of becoming even poorer. It’s a dangerous cultural trait for many of us, who don’t want to puff ourselves up but instead tend to err on the side of self-deprecation, veering towards self-pity. So we might catch ourselves saying: “If only we had more inspiring scholars to do our theology for us, if only we had more courageous bishops who were sympathetic to our style, if only we had more money to refurbish our church spaces and develop our musicians, if only we had more spirit of adventure in our liturgical innovation, if only...” But hear the word of the Lord: “From those who have not, even what they have will be taken away.”

And hear also the word of the Lord: “To those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance.” If we develop the habit of counting our blessings as catholic Christians, God will give us some more. If we cultivate a culture of abundance in our common life, we open ourselves up to growing richer. So, for example:

We have a wonderful tradition of theological scholarship. Which of you good, clear thinkers and strong analytical minds and clever researchers and canny debaters, which of you, in your busy working years or your busy retirement years, which of you are going to get yourselves along to Trinity College for a proper rigorous theology degree, and serve your tradition by not only knowing it properly but by advancing it significantly? Here’s our challenge: to see at least as many theologically sophisticated 60-somethings graduating from Trinity as there are earnest 20-somethings graduating from the college up the road.

And we have a wonderful tradition of liturgical innovation. Which of you serious artists or generous patrons of art, which of you amateur or professional musicians, which of you longtime servers or readers or intercessors are going to share responsibility for re-inventing Catholic liturgy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Here’s our challenge: to put at least as much time and money into wonderful liturgical art and cutting-edge liturgical music and adventurous liturgical re-shaping in our parishes, as others are putting into propagating the latest Hillsong technology.

So if any of you have ever heard yourselves complaining about having to learn a new hymn tune, if you’ve lamented the fact that people just don’t use kneelers the way they used to, if you’ve considered withdrawing your pledge if “they” dare to remove the pulpit, the altar rail, the Prayer of Humble Access, or your favourite bit of ritual – and if you’ve ever glorified your complaint by invoking “tradition” when really what we’re dealing with is “convention” or “habit” – it’s time for a change! Tonight is about a commitment not to preservation, but to construction. There is more work to be done, and we are the people who must do it. No bishop or archbishop will do it for us. No saint or scholar from the early church or the 19<sup>th</sup> century will do it for us. Our vocation is to build tomorrow’s Church, in the Spirit’s power.

So tonight, by God’s grace, we can commit ourselves to listen less to our fears, and more to Jesus’ words of generous affirmation. We can choose to focus less on the gaps the mice may have nibbled away in the storehouse of our customs, and focus more on the treasures of wisdom, on her paths of peace, and on the tree of life that she is to those who lay hold of her. We can decide, tonight, to obsess less about the blessings and blind-spots of others, and to give more heartfelt thanks for the blessings we have been given in such abundance.

So know, tonight, that this is who we are: the “haves” who are hungry to have still more from God’s generous hand; the much-blessed who are not embarrassed to pray for yet more blessings; the privileged disciples who know we are so richly blessed that we can well afford to keep on giving our abundance away, evermore and evermore. **Amen.**