

A word of the day: Inexorable. It means something that carries on and on, without the possibility of ever being prevented. Nothing can get in the way of something that's inexorable. Similar words might be 'relentless', or 'unstoppable.' It's the best word that I can find to describe how God's love and God's realm are shown in our readings today. They are inexorable.

Some people live their whole lives on a knife edge, worried that they'll make a bad call and break their world.

Some feel that if they disappoint their parents or get cross with their partner or let down a friend they'll end up bereft – the parents will withdraw their affection and support, their partner will leave them or the friend will walk away. So they work really hard all the time to behave perfectly, but there's this tense, anxious energy underpinning everything. What if I say the wrong thing? What if they get bored with me?

Other people appear not to care so much, but sometimes their seeming carelessness is a front, a cover, so as not to let anyone know that deep down, they'd be devastated if they were rejected or left alone.

For some people, the anxiety about "wrecking their lives" doesn't take the form of broken relationships so much as failing to progress a career, or being financially strapped, or becoming unwell. These people put a lot of energy into "doing what it takes" to get ahead, or to stay fit or to manage their investments or their business. It takes a lot of striving, stress and skill to try and keep control of our complex lives, and even then, a twist in the road can throw all our plans to the wind.

Sadly, these anxious, driven approaches to life and relationships don't just apply to our day-to-day existence but also to our expectations of God. In the back of some people's minds, God is this great big parent or judge who's just waiting to cut off our salvation and cast us into darkness. This God looks constantly for evidence of sin or failure and then turns their divine back on us, only reluctantly turning around when we've offered enough apologies and anxious promises to "do better."

It is possible to find this God in the Bible, but there is a much stronger testimony throughout the Scriptures of a God who is unstoppably working for our good, and keeping their face turned toward us no matter what.

Paul's letter to the Romans, and today's cluster of parables from Matthew's gospel make it abundantly clear that the love of God, and the unfolding of the kingdom of heaven in the world are "inexorable." God's love and the working out of God's good will in the world have nothing to do with our ability to make things happen or to be worthy.

We don't even have to pray by ourselves! The passage from Romans begins with the assurance that God listens to God's Spirit praying inside us. God searches our hearts and then offers prayers on our behalf that only God can hear and interpret. The only thing we have to do is turn up with the intention to pray, with or without words.

And more, no matter what this world can throw at us, all the difficulties and hatred or cruelty that might come our way, including demonic interference or violent death, or our own failure, confusion, faithlessness or stupidity, none of this can stop the inexorable loving will of God, which is to keep the living, eternal part of us secure in God's heart.

Which doesn't mean that there's no such thing as judgement, or that there are no consequences for our actions, or responsibility for our behaviour. And it doesn't mean that life will be kind to us, or that we won't suffer. But it does mean that ultimately, we are held secure because it's not up to us. God's Spirit is in us and we belong to God. We can't break our lives to the point where we are annihilated or eternally rejected by the God who made us and loves us to the end. Because God is for us, not against us.

You will notice that I am here renouncing the doctrine of hell as eternal punishment. Unfortunately, Scripture fragments like the one we heard today and last week about a sorting process between the "evil" and the "righteous" and a "furnace of fire" and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" can have the effect of unsettling us to the point of not being able to hear and appreciate the rest of the text around them. It is clear that Jesus anticipates some kind of judgement of human evil, and he does use some juicy imagery to describe the distress that evil experiences in the face of God's justice. But it is more accurate to think of fire as an inevitably painful purging process, rather than an endless punishment that God metes out to people who sinned in this life. And as Allison shared with us last week, it is never a good idea to think that we are the ones who can judge who needs purification – that's why the sifting is deferred until the end of the age and carried out by God's angels, not fellow sinners in the church.

Having set that aside, let's look at what the parables say about the inexorable quality of God's reign in us and in this world. A tiny seed grows into a large tree – without any input from us, it's just what seeds do, because God's creative life is in them. A huge batch of flour only needs a small portion of yeast to rise – it's inexorable, because that's how yeast works. A net catches up all the fish that it passes, because that's how nets work. God's life in us and the world unfolds because God's Spirit is breathing life and that's how God works.

The merchant and the person who found the treasure both 'find' something incredibly precious and then act to hold on to it. I find both these parables most compelling when I see these characters not as us but as God, the one who leaves the 99 in search of the 1, who rejoices on finding them, and having found them, will do everything to hold on to them. This is the inexorable love of God, from which nothing can separate us. We are the found pearl, and God has bought the whole field to keep us as God's treasure.

It is costly for God to love in this way. We can't be separated from the love of God, because God's love for us is *in Christ Jesus our Lord*, who gave up heaven to come and find us and show us God's face in human form, and who then gave up his life to claim us as God's own. In our baptism we are sealed with the cross of Christ and filled with the indwelling Spirit marking us as God's own for ever. This same Spirit keeps us in a constant flow of presence and communion with God whether we are aware of it or not. This same Spirit is a sign to all hostile powers and the forces of death that we belong to God and cannot be snatched from God's hand. We are secure in God's promises, which will endure even if mountains crumble and the stars fall from the sky.

Therefore, let us be peaceful and confident. Other people may let us down or turn away from us, and maybe we will make some choices that make our lives harder than they need to be. But God is weaving the light and dark of our lives to make something good, and nothing, literally nothing, can separate us from the inexorable love of God.

In silence, reflect on the image of God that I hold unconsciously:

Do I ever feel afraid that God will reject me?

Do I feel like a disappointment to God?

Do I worry that God is angry with me?

Do I think that God's judgement might destroy me?

Or do I feel very secure in God's love?

Do I know deep down that God is for me and will keep me always?

How does my image of God affect my self-talk – the little voice inside me that approves or disapproves of my choices?

How does my confidence, or lack of confidence, in the love of God affect my relationships?

As we stay in the silence, you may wish to form in your mind a prayer to God, responding to these reflections.

Or, you can trust that the Spirit in you is praying on your behalf, and just hold your heart open for this prayer to take place.

Amen.