*1 Kings 3:5-12, Rom 8:26-39, Matt.13: 31-33, 44-52* ***HOPE IN ADVERSITY***

Such riches in our readings today - Solomon's desire for wisdom, the Spirit's presence in our prayers, the constancy of God's love in Christ, the astonishing growth promised for his kingdom. But plenty of challenge, too, and some puzzlement - especially as we contemplate the numbers of lives lost or overturned and whole areas ravaged by wildfires this past week.

Paul's ecstatic celebration of God's constant support and love for us is

at first hugely comforting and reassuring; but when we look more closely at his words, it seems that he confines God's loving provision to those who are "called according to His purpose", indeed to those "predestined to be con-formed to the image of his Son". "Does that include us?" some might ask.

Then the last of Matthew's parables of the kingdom, that of the fishing net, suggests that some of us who think we are within God's kingdom will in fact be thrown out at the end of time, just as "bad fish" are thrown out of the fisherman's dragnet at the market. Fish (or people) of every kind are drawn into the net, the community of the faithful; but some are then rejected as inedible - or unacceptable. Matthew is a stern disciplinarian and his reference to Hell, "where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth", recurs constantly throughout his Gospel. He had no qualms about terrifying people into the Kingdom! We may be either good or bad individuals, he insists here - and too bad if it's the latter! Fortunately, there are other passages in his Gospel that are not as fierce. So we may ask: could the good and bad be mixed in each individual, the bad to be weeded out eventually? That interpretation may make sense today - but I doubt it was Matthew's.

So yes, there are problems, as well as comfort, in today's readings. Could we possibly believe, as some interpreters of Romans have suggested, that God created some people with the intention of destroying them in hell fire at the end of their lives? Such an idea, known as "double predestination", has to be roundly rejected if we think of God as the creative love that holds us all in being, healing our wounds and leading us into all truth. We may ascribe a degree of *foreknowledge* or *intention*to God, along with loving, healing care; but *no degree of ill will* to anyone. Because the gospel Jesus of Nazareth came to bring was of God's love and mercy for all humanity without exception, especially the outcast. Jesus healed the centurion's servant, the Phoenician woman's child, the lepers and the maimed; he shared God's love

with publican and sinner, Samaritan and Greek as well as Jew, slave as well as free, women every bit as much as men. That is why we are followers of Christ, is it not?

We are all "called according to his purpose". Yes, I believe each one of us is called, according to God's purpose for each one. Every individual because of his or her innate talents, particular context, and personal experience - including that of distress, harm and injustice - has the wherewithal to bring God's blessing to those around them, in a way that they alone can. Were you deserted by your mother and dumped in a home? Beaten by an alcoholic parent and berated by their angry spouse? Sexually abused by a relation or a supposedly holy man? All those horrors can ruin a person's life, if we allow them to; but if brought to God for healing - (as well as to the law courts for redress) - they can be the source of transformation both for the victim and for others in like distress. That is why the Church's Ministry of Healing is so important; and also the listening ears and the prayers of each one of us. From such small encounters, the kingdom of God can grow, like a tree from a mustard seed, offering restoration and shelter for all and delight in the experience of God's amazing love.

That is the potential. But the fact is that none of us are perfect, or likely to be so any time soon. Worse than that: human self-interest, our instinct for self-preservation and the defence of our own patch - whether a cottage, a nation or a lost empire - has led to the wars and rumours of wars that, together with burning forests, raging floods and increasing famine, all induced by human greed, look more and more likely to result in the end of the world as we know it.

God may be for us - so who can be against us? It seems we are against ourselves - or at least against one another - resistant to his grace.

In a book titled "The End of Time", a former mentor of mine at Princeton, a sociologist of religion, suggested that fear of our time coming to an end, despair even, was liable to lead to fascism in both church and state, fuelled by populist unrest. Looking around the world today, there are signs that he was right. Far too many countries lack both wise political leadership and thoughtful democracy; and we may look in vain for commanding spiritual precepts to lead us out of the mire.

So what, as Christians called according to God's purpose, are we to do? Where to find and nurture the wisdom God promised to Solomon? What can we hope God might do? Is flawed humanity, unwittingly self-destructive as we have proved to be, deserving of any future - even a disembodied one in some para-universe?

Well, I hope with all the energy I can summon that we hold on to Christian hope - even if that hope has to be re-defined. It is not the simple hope of "Jesus will be coming back soon and he'll make everything all right". No thinking person since Galileo inhabits the three decker universe the biblical writers pictured in their view of the end times. Nor does it have to be the hope that life on this planet will continue indefinitely. Science tells us such a hope is unrealistic, unpalatable though that may be.

No, our hope stands surely in the certainty of St. Paul, that nothing can separate us from the love of God - in this world or the next. It is the hope engendered by Christ's promise that he has "gone to prepare a place" for us. It is the hope, the assurance, of Julian of Norwich, that great 14th century mystic, that "all will be well, and all manner of things will be well, in the best of all possible worlds." Such possible worlds may be beyond the material as we experience it. Does not St Paul tell us that we will be raised in "spiritual bodies"? Our eternal destiny is spiritual - in a dimension of mystery than we cannot know from here. Therein, ultimately, lies our hope, however much we grieve the loss of this beautiful world.

But Hope is only one of the three essentials. Love and Faith are needed too - a trust in God's goodness that opens us to the Spirit who will lead us into all truth and makes us channels of his love. In the end, to quote Julian once again, "Love is God's meaning". Only by learning to live in that love, sharing and caring for all around us, near and far, whatever their place on planet earth, can we truly rejoice in hope. May each one of us here embody that love today, in a gift to someone in need that will be the first of many . . .

Come, Holy Spirit, inflame us with God's love, that Christ may live in us and we in Him, and your kingdom come in all human hearts - far more than a pearl of great price. (Pause) In the words of our opening hymn "God doth call one and all, he who follows shall not fall". In Jesus' name. Amen.