

Proper 12 Year A 2020

The people who first listened to Matthew's Gospel (probably Jewish Christians who had fled persecution in Jerusalem after the Roman's sacked the Temple in 70AD, and now living in Antioch) these people would have identified with the characters described in today's collection of parables, although they might have been in strange territory when it came to 'the kingdom of heaven'. This kingdom isn't full of kings, lords, warriors, there is no glory, majesty, might in this section of Matthew's Gospel; this kingdom is full of people who are just like themselves – they belong in the kingdom of heaven – they make up the kingdom. Now, that is something new. The people who make up the kingdom are farmers, fishermen, traders, women baking bread – ordinary folk finding God not in obedience to misunderstood rules and regulations but in the mundanity of everyday life. Heaven, they are being told, isn't an unattainable place 'out there' for the wise and well educated – it is in the field, in the kitchen, in the market place, in the fishing boat. Heaven in Ordinary.

Let's think about the parable of the mustard seed. The plant to which Jesus is referring was a pernicious weed that grew at an alarming rate - the last thing you would want in your field. If you had ploughed your land, weeded it well, bought (or saved) good seed – and then discovered that there was one plant growing that you didn't want, mustard, how would you feel. This plant could grow to a great height, draining moisture and goodness from the soil, casting shadow over the crop, and it is difficult to eradicate – and Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed deliberately sown

in the field. That puts the harvest in jeopardy, the expectation of a field of pure wheat suitable for milling has been lost. The kingdom of heaven is like that! Surely not! Think again!

This is why I find living the Christian life so difficult. Every time I think I have got a handle on what I am supposed to be doing God plants a mustard seed into my certainty and says 'surprised you there, didn't I? Think again'. Into the well tilled and cultivated life of my faith, a weed springs up, a weed which casts a long shadow on my lovely garden – and offers a place of refuge, safety and security for 'all the birds of the air' – who are, of course all the people who are not 'us'. In first century Judaism, 'all the birds of the air' was a euphemism for Gentiles, so here Jesus is saying that the kingdom of heaven is shelter, security and refuge for all nations, not just for Jews, and Matthew's Jewish Christian church in Antioch would have struggled with that, as would the Jewish Christians in Rome as they read Paul's letter (even though there were Gentiles in that church – just ripe for 'us' and 'them').

And what about the woman baking bread? First of all, how could the kingdom of heaven be about a woman? That in itself would be shocking – and then look what she did. Her yeast was not in a packet bought from the supermarket, it would have been a piece of dough saved from the last baking day, ready to be mixed into the new flour – and look how much there was of that! If you don't have enough 'leaven' the bread won't rise; if it is stale or gone off – end of baking. I have done a lot of bread baking during lock down, but I have never attempted sour dough – far too risky.

But that is what she does, and she not only gets it right, she makes enough bread to feed a whole village at a wedding feast – profligate! That is what the kingdom of heaven is like – like a profligate woman feeding a whole village.

So the kingdom of heaven not only welcomes the outsiders to rest, feel secure, find refuge, it also feeds them, offers abundance. Do we do that?

*(Little aside – thank you to all who said that they had read last week's sermon and then sent their hairdressing saving to a charitable cause – wonderful.)*

So, the kingdom grows slowly, like a weed in the field or dough rising. You wait patiently for it to be revealed. But what if you suddenly stumble upon it, after years of fruitless searching, like a merchant seeking the perfect pearl, or a tenant farmer digging something up with his plough? Would you think that giving up absolutely everything you have in order to acquire what you have suddenly found a good idea, or simply ridiculous? But isn't that what Jesus is saying – if you want to live in the kingdom you have to be prepared to make sacrifices, sometimes huge sacrifices. Read that to Christians who are persecuted for their faith, and you will see a knowing nod of the head. Certainly many who first read Matthew's Gospel would recognise the sacrifices they had made in order to follow Jesus. The hidden treasure – the pearl of great price – was their relationship with Jesus, and they had given everything to have that.

So, the kingdom can grow slowly or it can be suddenly revealed.

Ah, but then we come to the dragnet, the only one of the kingdom parables in today's reading which has anything of the 'end time' about it.

In Matthew's Gospel it follows the explanation of the parable of the weeds in the field, where, at harvest time, the reapers separate the weeds from the wheat. Here, the catch is separated into good fish and bad – a warning that actions (or inactions) have consequences.

All these parables challenge us at two levels. Firstly, do we understand? Secondly, do we act? Understanding is useless if it doesn't lead us to action. Action without understanding is usually for the purposes of self-esteem – look at me, how good I am – and God doesn't get a look in, a bit like those Pharisees whom Jesus called 'you hypocrites'.

Jesus chose these images because they were relevant to his hearers – and today we have to find relevant images to express the Gospel and of how it has worked out in our lives and communities, nurturing growth, expecting surprises, finding heaven in ordinary.