

The kingdom of heaven is like ...

What is this business that we are about as Christians? What is it that we seek for, pray for, work for? What are we hoping or believing will come to be as a result of God's Spirit at work within us? That has been the question down through the centuries, thousands upon thousands of books have been written about it, countless sermons have been preached about it and the Church has torn itself apart discussing it. And yet, here in this section of Matthew's gospel he has conveniently gathered together the answer, which we conveniently ignore. The kingdom of heaven is like ...

The problem is that these are parables, and somewhere along the way we have convinced ourselves that we have outgrown parables. They are at best a nice earthly story with a heavenly meaning or at worst stories for children or those less sophisticated than us. So, when we hear, the kingdom of heaven is like, we expect to be given a blueprint, a manifesto, a 100-day plan of the tangible evidence of the kingdom of heaven. Instead, here we get mustard seeds, yeast, treasure, pearls, and nets. Nothing you can take to a grant making body, or

the Charity Commission, or develop into a strategic plan to say, look this is what we do.

But we overlook the parables at our peril. If we leave behind our preconceptions of them, if we leave behind the idea that they are somehow just nice stories, then we can see that they are actually quite subversive. Yes, they are down to earth, quite literally. They are common stories about ordinary things and people, yes. But in drawing people in with the familiar, Jesus catches them with the subversive. Mustard and yeast, a thief and a merchant, these would have jarred on the ears of Jesus' first audience and Matthew's readers. Mustard is a weed that farmers would pull up from a field, but here God's empire is compared to the mustard seed, starting very small and growing into a shrub, unwanted. Yeast, the agent that bloats and rots corpses and which would be cleaned from every house in preparation for Passover, is here a positive, God is fermenting the empire of heaven within the world, like the woman who mixes – or spoils – flour with yeast.

The man who finds treasure, finds it another person's field, what is he doing digging around in someone else's property? And he doesn't tell the owner

about the treasure, he hides it and buys the field knowing there is greater profit. Basically, theft. Merchants in those days were about as trusted as second-hand car salesmen are today. Their motives were suspect. This one however, practically puts himself out of business.

Beyond the familiarity of the images, the parables here take convention subverting people and things and use them to describe discipleship. Whatever else they mean, these parables at least hint that God's empire, the kingdom of heaven, is radically and fundamentally different from Rome's and every empire that follows. The kingdom of heaven is like, everything turned on its head.

And in that turning of everything on its head, Jesus brings the kingdom of heaven down to earth. These common stories about common people and common things are hardly an exalted vision of God's realm. But what more do we expect from the one who though being in very nature God, humbled himself to take on our human nature? The Incarnation is fundamental to our faith, the mystery of the meeting of the divine and the human in the person of Jesus Christ. In the parables Jesus puts that incarnational focus not on himself but on the world around him. The kingdom of heaven is like the most

common things in human life. Like Jesus himself, this everyday world embodies the sacred meeting of the divine and the human, if only we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

And we see that being worked through in Paul's letter to the Romans. The section we heard this morning is the culmination of Paul's argument begun in 5:1, echoing and elaborating his words on suffering and hope. Chapter 8 has been full of the promise of the Spirit: with the Spirit in us we are free from sin's power (8:9-11), what we long for is already glimpsed in the first fruits of the Spirit (8:18-23), the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is alive in us (8:11). And because of that we are heirs of that glory because we have been adopted as God's own children (8:15-6). The Spirit alive in us enables us to pray, Abba, Father (8:15).

And then Paul takes it further, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, interceding through us with groans too deep for words. It is an echo of the groaning of creation earlier in chapter 8, as we await the liberation of God. The kingdom of heaven is like a groaning God, groaning with creation and the whole cosmos. The groaning of the Spirit joins the groaning of creation and our groaning but

as “the searcher of hearts’, translates our longing into the very language of God. The earthiness we find in the parables is mirrored here in God being intimately involved in creation and our lives, groaning with us.

Now chapter 8 can be used as a kind of “pull yourself together, everything will be ok” kind of chapter. Verse 28 in particular, “we know that all things work together for good for those who love God.” It is fraught with difficulty translating that verse. Perhaps a better translation would be, “God makes all things work together for good **with** those who love him.” God actively accomplishes the redemption of all things, working with and through us, especially in prayer, “prayer is God’s work in us,” writes Rowan Williams.¹

The kingdom of heaven is like God working with you and me to bring to fruition God’s plans and God’s love, groaning with us in the meantime, longing with us to see the fullness of God’s kingdom. That’s why we pray, that’s why we pray about injustice, inequity, climate change, it is the groaning of us and God about how these things should not be. It’s why we are all being invited to Pray for Five, it’s the mustard seed, the leaven of prayer, working away unseen,

¹ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian*, p.80

often at times unfelt and hopeless. But by bringing these people into our time with God we also ask the Spirit to pray through us for them, the searcher of hearts who knows their hearts. And we enact what Solomon prays for in our first reading, a listening heart, not to build empires but to listen to what God might say to us about them, is it time for that phone call, that card, that conversation?

That's why we look to follow where God leads us in terms of how we serve our community and our world, how we give of ourselves, our time, talents and money. Last week we launched our 3-year giving campaign and our roof fund. We're not asking people to almost bankrupt themselves like the merchant or indulge in insider trading or digging up other peoples' fields. But we are inviting all of us to prayerfully consider, with listening hearts, where our resources are, what they are and what we can give from them. The resources we need to build the Kingdom of heaven here.

At the end of this section, Jesus asks the hearers if they understand what he has said. "Yes," they say, only the next passage is how Jesus is rejected at Nazareth. How we understand our part in the Kingdom of Heaven is like the

Year A
Eighth Sunday After Trinity
I Kings 3:5-12
Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

scribe at the end, being trained for the Kingdom of Heaven. That is our discipleship: in prayer, in our giving, in our living out of our understanding of what God is calling us all to.

For the kingdom of heaven is like ... you.