

More Parables of the Kingdom by Rev Jane Kraft
Matthew 13 v 31-33, 44-52
St Michael's 30 07 17

The Kingdom of heaven is like...

On many occasions Jesus begins his telling of a parable with these words and then used a very ordinary every day situation or event to illustrate his point. Last week John reminded us that the parable of the wheat and the weeds is but one of several parables “which we find in Matthew chapter 13 which use the image of growing plants to illustrate truths about the Kingdom of God. In all of them, there is a sense that the Kingdom has not yet been fully realised or completed.”¹

This week we not only encounter a mustard seed growing but Jesus using other objects like leaven, pearls, treasure and fish as illustrations of the kingdom.

We may think that the Kingdom of Heaven will come in a spectacular and powerful way but Jesus reveals that the Kingdom is already here, like a seed in the ground or leaven in bread or buried treasure if we will simply take notice. The Kingdom may be hidden, but it is hidden in plain sight, all around us for those who are able to see. — Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote

“Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.”

To the first century Jews the idea that the kingdom was like leaven would be an outrageous notion. Leaven, or yeast, was usually used as a symbol for impurity or evil. In the same way, the mustard seed and the mustard bush were not things associated with kingship that role was reserved for the majestic trees, like the cedars of Lebanon.

So to the original crowd listening to Jesus descriptions of the Kingdom of Heaven that would have been both shocking and surprising.

But Jesus had the tendency to turn the world’s ideas and concepts upside down. He was well known for pushing back the boundaries of convention.

And certainly there is a sense that the Kingdom is incongruous and astonishing.

In this morning’s parables we learn that not only is the Kingdom of great value but that from small beginnings it grows into something very significant.

Down the ages the church and world have remembered and honoured those who have been called to do great things the Saints and Martyrs, Great leaders of Church, and Government. But most people live their lives in insignificant obscurity, and for the majority of us the call to follow Christ is to witness in small seemingly insignificant ways. Often we do not know how we have worked for the kingdom as we quietly witness to God’s love in unobtrusive acts of service, perhaps it is good that it is this way or we might be guilty of the sin of pride.

¹ Sermon John Castle St Michael's 23 07 17

Sometimes it is just a smile or a kind word or action which transforms some ones day and in that moment they encounter the love of Christ.

But it has to be said that if love is the catalyst which builds up the kingdom, then just as surely unkind words, selfish acts or hurtful criticism can damage the Christian community and its witness.

St Paul talks about the tongue and its size in proportion to the damage it can do and the pain it can inflict. And that is as true today as it was over 2000 years ago.

One of the introductions to the peace states “We are the body of Christ, by one spirit we were all baptised into one body let us then pursue all that makes for peace and builds up the common good.” This should remind us of our place in the kingdom and our responsibility to support, encourage and enable each other. Our attitudes to one another are paramount in the building of the kingdom.

If we are to grow together as a Christian community and reach out to the wider world then we must pay attention to the way we treat each other.

Great oaks from little acorns grow my grand mother used to say. From small acts and thoughts of concern and consideration grows a loving truly Christian community.

I have to admit I enjoy watching those speeded up films of plants growing and flowers opening, clouds moving across the sky ; taken a frame at a time over a long period you are able to watch during a few minutes the whole process of development which took hours or days or even weeks to happen in real time.

As the leaven works unseen in the dough, its powerful action hidden yet relentless and pervasive, making it into light delicious bread

and as the mustard seed grows into a tree of great size in which the birds can find rest and shelter so the things we say and do and the way we live our Christian lives enables the Church to grow and develop and to display the love of Christ not only with in its members but to the world around.

P.M Forni, In his book *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-five Rules of Considerate Conduct.* writes:-

“I was on a train on a rainy day...For some reason I became intent on watching the raindrops on the window. Two separate drops, pushed by the wind, merged into one for a moment and then divided again – each carrying with it a part of the other. Simply by that momentary touching, neither was what it had been before. And as each one went to touch other raindrops, it shared not only itself, but what it had gleaned from the other. I saw this metaphor many years ago and it is one of my most vivid memories. I realized then that we never touch people so lightly that we do not leave a trace. Our state of being matters to those around us, so we need to become conscious of what we unintentionally share so that we can learn to share with intention.”²

“We never touch people so lightly that we do not leave a trace.”

² P.M Forni,, Choosing Civility: The Twenty-five Rules of Considerate Conduct. St. Martin's Press; © 2003

Sometimes we get disheartened when we work hard at something and do not see any visible progress.

The stories of the Leaven and of the Mustard seed remind us that something very small and seemingly insignificant can have far reaching and profound effects. If we are prepared to let the Holy Spirit have full reign in our lives then our small beginnings will grow to the glory of God.

The change may be imperceptible but by God's grace the transformation will be above all imagining.

The late Maurice Wood was bishop of Norwich from 1971 – 1985, he wrote this prayer;

"Almighty God you have made us members of Christ and of his church in this parish.
May we as a congregation reach upwards to your throne in worship and adoration;
inwards to one another in understanding and fellowship;
and outwards to the world in evangelism and social compassion."³

³ Contemporary Parish Prayers © 1975 Hodder and Stoughton