

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52 Sermon

In a world where the church looks increasingly irrelevant, where more of those within the church are unclear about what is so great about Christianity anyway, and where we still wait for God to come and right so many wrongs throughout the whole of history, the reading this morning seems completely fitting. All of these parables this morning give us a snapshot of what 'The Kingdom of Heaven' looks like, meaning, what it looks like as God comes to live with his people. God's Kingdom on earth is real. Its influence has begun, but these stories tell us what it tastes and smells like.

The interesting thing for me, when looking at it and reading around, was that some of these parables, which most of us will have heard before, were told to the crowd and some of them were given in a more private setting to Jesus's close friends. Maybe looking at them through the eyes of their audiences will give us a new idea of how they might relate to us today.

Firstly then, Jesus tells the crowd – a crowd so huge that he has to sit in a boat while they fill the beach – the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, a small seed grows into a 10-foot tall bush where birds nest. Jesus employs hyperbole since neither is the seed the smallest in the world, nor is the mustard shrub a tree; but the point is the proverbial contrast between the small seeds of God's kingdom, looking insignificant and delicate, eventually becoming an unrecognizably large tree which is so big it provides a home for the wild birds.

Similarly, Jesus tells the crowd about the yeast: unimpressive, small and invisible, and yet with the power to transform an amazingly large batch of dough. Again, the numbers Jesus uses are meant to astonish – three measures of flour would mean about 50kg of dough, enough to feed a small army! The point being that the work of the small, invisible yeast accomplishes an astonishing outcome.

What is Jesus saying here, therefore? Why does he say it to an entire crowd of people?

In a country where the church is increasingly seen as irrelevant, outdated and a bit eccentric, perhaps these parables are perfect. They talk of the seeming insignificance of the Kingdom of Heaven – just as many see the church as insignificant today – and yet the profound consequences of God's faithful people carrying out their vocation in our world. The word for 'church' in the New Testament means literally, those 'called out' by God – this parable, for us, reminds us that if we fulfil our calling as God's people, even if it seems small and irrelevant, the effects will be profound. It also means that God's church may have to consider whether it has lost its way if it goes about seeking status and recognition – these things aren't bad: the Kingdom will be recognized as a large tree one day – but if that is what we seek, rather than to grow and leaven our society and culture, even in invisible ways, then we have lost our way.

Why tell the whole crowd? Maybe it is important for the crowd to hear of this Kingdom which it may only catch as a rumour on the breeze. Maybe the crowd needs to know that no matter how irrelevant and small the Kingdom of God is, it is real, at work, and will continue to work, even hidden, until God returns to his people in full. However, Jesus doesn't say, look at my disciples and see what good they do and therefore appreciate them. He doesn't seek to glorify God's Kingdom or the new-forming church – instead he announces that there is a reality, even if you can't see it, and it will continue until the whole world is transformed. What a vision that is? And what an encouragement for us, who are used to feeling sidelined in faith.

Then Jesus retires to a private setting and tells his disciples more parables – the parable of the treasure, the pearl and the fish. The private setting means he addresses the internal audience – our concerns as followers of Jesus – rather than the whole crowd.

The two parables of the treasure hidden in a field and the pearl indicate the value of the Kingdom of God for Jesus's friends. Just as occasionally we hear of medieval hordes being found by metal detectorists, in Jesus's day it wasn't unusual to bury a treasure in times of difficulty. The point of both these parables, however, is the fact that both the treasure and the pearl are worth selling absolutely everything else to get hold of. In a world which sees God's Kingdom as irrelevant and invisible, the reality is that following Jesus, though hugely costly, is more valuable than anything else.

The tricky thing about this, if I'm honest, is that it often doesn't feel that way. I can't imagine I'm alone. So what is it about the Kingdom of Heaven, that even hidden and insignificant in the eyes of others, makes it priceless and so desirable that we are driven to having it even if it costs us everything?

Of course, Jesus's parable doesn't answer this question, and it's left for the disciples to reflect upon how Jesus can liken the joy of giving everything for a share in the Kingdom of Heaven to that of the joy of a man selling everything for a treasure. It is left for us to ask ourselves the question of whether following Jesus is indeed like the pearl – whether it is worth sacrificing the portfolio of all that we value in our lives to seek God's kingdom first above all things. For Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven is self-evidently pricelessly valuable. God's will on earth is worth more than our will in our own lives. Let's reflect upon that for ourselves.

Then the final parable is the one about sorting fish – a common feature of the Capernaum waterside. Fishing is indiscriminate – you don't get to choose what wanders into your net – and so sorting it out later is the only option. This is the image that Jesus uses to address the fact that for the disciples, they were part of this invisible Kingdom of Heaven, and it had cost them everything and would cost them their lives, and yet God's judgment and justice seemed as far off as it ever had.

This is no different to how it can feel for us today. Why embrace the costliness of Christian discipleship when we see no evidence of God's justice, and we see those outside the church prospering despite their lack of faith in Jesus?

Jesus's story raises the further possibility of 'bad fish' in the Kingdom of God which is available indiscriminately for everyone. Whereas on one level, this shocks us – there will be bad apples in life, and even within the church. On another level, this just frees us from comparing with each other and lets us get on with being the called people of God, chasing the most valuable prize in life – a life in the Kingdom – and leaving any issues of judgement up to God, no matter how long that takes.

This is the internal, disciples-only story then – that although the Kingdom of Heaven, which may or may not equate to the Church, is often invisible or seen as irrelevant, it is the most valuable place we can seek in our lives. By selling out for the Kingdom, we are freed from worrying about who is 'in' or 'out', leaving that to God, and simply embracing the cost of following Jesus over all other things; not seeking power or recognition in our world, but instead seeking to obey Jesus in leavening the dough of his world and providing shelter for his creation. This is the highest calling, the costliest calling, and the holiest calling of our lives. Amen.