

Trinity 7 (30.07.2017): The Kingdom of Heaven Parables
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

(1 Kings 3:5-12 and Romans 8:26- end)

Prayer

Earlier this month Avril and I attended the celebratory service in the Great Hall at Dartington for the “Way with Words” Festival held there every year. John Bell from the Iona Community gave the sermon which he titled “The Eloquence of Resonance”. He told the story of how one of his good friends had been fortunate to enter the Kingdom of Heaven from a very early age when he was just three. Remember it is God who chooses us and sometimes in the most unexpected ways. This three year old - let’s call him Harry - would regularly visit his grandma, who had a small wooden box, which she called her promise box. Often when Harry visited her she would ask him if he would like a promise from the promise box. Harry never refused the offer and his grandma would fetch the box from the shelf where it was carefully kept. She would open the promise box and ask Harry to take out one small piece of straw with a pair of tweezers she gave him. There were many pieces of straw, so it required all of Harry’s manipulative skills to pick just the one out. His grandma, using the same pair of tweezers would then take out from inside the tiny straw a tightly rolled piece of paper. She would then unroll

the piece of paper and read to Harry just one of the many promises Jesus gave to his disciples. Perhaps it was the promise of rest or abundant life or power from on high. Or perhaps it was the promise that he would return or that he will be with us always to the end of the age. So many promises to those who become the disciples of Jesus and enter the Kingdom of Heaven! Harry never forgot the promise box and as he grew, so did his faith, until he became a dedicated inhabitant of the Kingdom of Heaven.

So what, where and when is the Kingdom of Heaven? How, like Harry, can we become inhabitants of the Kingdom? In this morning's gospel Jesus tells five parables concerning the Kingdom of Heaven. Like last week we have more of being thrown into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Unlike last week Jesus does not give an interpretation of the parables. Like the disciples, we are left to make our own sense of what they mean. "Have you understood all this?" Jesus asks his disciples...and he also asks us. They answered, "Yes". Somehow or other I think the "Yes" is rather ironic. But can we better answer Jesus' question because we now have the whole gospel before us, because we now know the history of the Church over the last 2000 years? I suspect any "Yes" is as much of another of Jesus' promises as of any definite understanding. If, like me, you are still striving to understand, you will wrestle with these parables and answer Jesus' question honestly, "Not really, Jesus, please tell me.

What on earth are you on about?” Still striving to understand, but recognizing what a wonderful thing it is to be part of that striving.

Followers of Jesus have been seeking clear, direct, satisfying interpretations of his parables from when he first uttered them until now. If we want to uncover the meaning and experience of these parables we must be prepared to struggle, be disturbed, bemused and confounded. We must muddy the waters before they settle and then we can perhaps see more clearly. So here goes.

On one level the parables of the Kingdom of Heaven being like a mustard seed or yeast is perfectly understandable. Great oaks from little acorns grow or large streams from little fountains flow may be seen as more modern interpretations. Actually there are many seeds smaller than the mustard seed and in reality the mustard plant at maximum will only grow to about 12 feet high and 6 feet wide. Those birds had better be careful where they build their nests. Also when I make bread it doesn't matter how much yeast I put into it, it never seems to rise the way I want. I must change my bread maker or throw it out. Perhaps the Message's version of the mustard seed parable makes more sense. "God's Kingdom is like a pine seed. It's quite small as seeds grow but in the course of years it grows into a huge pine tree and eagles build their nests in it." The mustard seed parable is a veiled message to the Jewish leaders, who were always trying to catch Jesus out, which said my little

flock doesn't look very strong at the moment, but just you wait and see how it grows. And who can deny that growth? Yeast is hidden. You can't see it in the bread, but it has a transforming influence. Jesus is saying you'll be amazed at what my flock will achieve gradually as they transform communities.

On another level the mustard seed can be seen as an invasive weed, very difficult to get rid of. Yeast, known as leaven, also can have a bad press. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul writes about the leaven of malice and wickedness. Jesus warns his disciples to be aware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Perhaps Jesus is being subversive in these two parables and mocking the triumphalism of projects and institutions, including the Church, when they succumb to secular power, built on collusion and competition and become too impressed by their own strength, success and size. How easy it is for the church to get things out of proportion; to spend time and energy on matters which are far away from spreading the Kingdom of Heaven.

So to find an understanding of the parables, you need imagination. Unless we realise that things are not what they seem to be and that they will not be what they are forever - as the mustard seed and yeast reveal - we will miss what really matters the most - the pearl, the treasure - and we then substitute a god of lesser value and meaning. Jesus said, "You can gain the whole world but lose your soul." In these parables

Jesus seeks to shift our attention, to expand our awareness, to alter our perception, to change our behaviour. We are too easily wedded to everyday secular life and find too much comfort in material trinkets and the unstable circumstances of fleeting celebrity lives. So he tells these parables in the hope that we might begin to ponder God's reign in his Kingdom. Perhaps even to seek it above all else! Then we will find the treasure, the pearl that is Jesus, that is his Kingdom and these are treasures which are worth giving up everything for. Do we understand all these things?

The good news in today's gospel is that there is a treasure to be found, a treasure we can all have. The treasure that is Jesus found in the simple bread and wine we will receive in Communion. And this treasure is to be shared, not kept to oneself. We must tell all about Jesus and his Kingdom- a treasure to be shared indeed. In Jesus we see and hear what many prophets and righteous people had longed to see and hear. He himself is the parable of the Kingdom of Heaven and as we are made in his likeness each one of us, as did Harry, is capable of reflecting the Kingdom of Heaven and reaping the promises of the Kingdom.

And do we understand all this?

Bill Pattinson
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