

Kingdom Ready: Growing the Kingdom - Matthew 13:24-35

“Jesus told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed ears, then the weeds also appeared. ‘The owner’s servants came to him and said, “Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?” ‘“An enemy did this,” he replied. ‘The servants asked him, “Do you want us to go and pull them up?” ‘“No,” he answered, “because while you are pulling up the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: first collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.”’”

He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.’

He told them still another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about thirty kilograms of flour until it worked all through the dough.’ Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.’”

Matt. 13:24-35 NIVUK

I wonder how many of you have played 20 Questions - you choose something and others have to try to work out what it is by asking you Yes/No questions... It can be a great ice-breaker, but not perhaps, the most effective way of learning about something. When we read the Gospels, trying to get our heads around what the Kingdom of God is like, is a bit like playing 20 questions sometimes. I expect the disciples were equally confused!

Just imagine it for a moment...

Perhaps, one hot sunny day, as the disciples are resting under a shady tree, Peter leans over and asks Jesus, “Is God’s kingdom here and now or coming in the future?”

Jesus responds, “Yes.”

Spotting a chance to get one up on his brother, Andrew has a go next. “Jesus, is the kingdom here on earth or is it in God’s heavenly realm?”

Jesus nods, knowingly and answers, “Precisely!”

Maybe James then has a crack at it. “Jesus, is the kingdom in plain sight, or is it hidden?”

Jesus pauses, looks around at their eager faces, smiles and says, “Absolutely!”

How frustrating... but we know ministers never give you a straight answer!

We mustn’t forget that Jesus was a Jew - a rabbi who spoke Hebrew and like the rabbis, He used parables, the oral story-telling tradition, as a familiar method of teaching. Last week, Tom shared the parable of the sower and showed how Jesus challenged his listeners - challenges us - to look at the condition of our heart:

- Is our heart rocky soil where we are distracted from God?
- Is it choked by thorns and weeds so we are disillusioned by the pain and discomfort of Christian living?
- .. or is our heart good soil for growing the Kingdom of God?

How Kingdom Ready are we?

Rabbis often talked about God’s kingdom, but Jesus’ parables, surprised and shocked them and turned their thinking completely upside down. So this morning we are having a look at three more of his Kingdom parables.

<< READING >>

The Kingdom of Heaven is like Marmite...

... once discovered at the end of the 19th century, it quickly spread across Europe. Although food snobs object strongly to it’s unique distinctive flavour, it is enjoyed worldwide as a simple wholesome food (full of folic acid and B12) that strengthens life. Recognising it’s inexplicable appeal to the ordinary man (and

woman and child), by adding vegetables, spices, colouring and other additives, within 20 years, the enemy quickly produced Vegemite, a poor counterfeit copy, which has seduced many away from the true product.

My poor, clearly biased, modern parable, attempts to demonstrate how the Kingdom of God invokes a powerful response from people - they either love it, hate it, or have been taken in by poor substitute. I leave you for a moment to consider where you stand!

When we hear, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like...", we can almost feel ourselves settling back to listen to the start of a nice story... we smile and nod, waiting for the familiar reassurance of our understandingbut we forget that Jesus was a revolutionary Palestinian who had come to change the world; He was not a gentle bedtime storyteller! So, let's see if we can look a bit deeper into what He might have actually been saying... (and you'll have to forgive me but I'm going to look at them in a reverse order!)

YEAST

"The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast... mixed into flour." But this was not an episode from the Great Bake Off! It's not meant to be a warm, comforting image of home baking, mother with apron, happy obedient children helping to prepare the evening meal. Here, using the everyday task of bread making, so familiar to his listeners, Jesus is using yeast to describe how His kingdom was coming to the ordinary life of ordinary people ...with the power to transform them into a kingdom that is anything but ordinary! The smallest quantity of yeast, mixed into the flour is quickly hidden internally but it gradually bubbles up inside and in time, transforms the entire batch of dough, giving it a distinctive flavour as well. The dough needs to be soft and pliable, of course, for the yeast to work its way through it all... and in the same way, our hearts need to be open and receptive to transforming work of the Holy Spirit within us.

I came to Alpha here a few years ago and God began my heart transformation. We read in Ezekiel 36:26 "*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh*" and the Holy Spirit certainly did so with me! It took a while for me to realise that I really can trust the Lord with my heart (as well as my head) and when I let go of needing to control everything, I found real freedom. The Holy Spirit is indeed a master baker - but I don't think he's finished kneading me yet (that's kneading, not needing!)

In Luke 17:21, when the Pharisees asked when the Kingdom of God would come, Jesus said that it was not something that could be observed, "... the kingdom of God is within you". When we are under His lordship, and when He is in control of our life, that is evidence of the kingdom of God. It is not about rules and regulations, it's about a full relationship with God - one that brings us "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). And that's the kingdom message from this parable - when we submit to God's sovereignty, we are transformed from the inside - it's personal, we are changed... a new creation.

MUSTARD SEED

The second parable today, was comparing the Kingdom of Heaven to a mustard seed - which is very tiny, indeed. We read in Matthew 17 that if we have faith the size of a mustard seed we can move mountains but here, Jesus was not just giving a glib reassurance that our little bit of mustard-seed sized faith is all we need. In first century Palestine, listeners would know that Jesus was referring to the way that the mustard plant is not only fast growing, but totally invasive - its roots go deep and it quickly takes over the soil making it unusable for other vegetation. It was known as a cheap, fast growing plant that could return a quick cash crop but it was also uncontainable and would change the landscape irrevocably. No matter how hard you try to uproot the mustard shrub, it always re-emerges elsewhere. (A bit like Japanese knotweed, which apparently can crack tarmac, block drains, undermine foundations and strip 20% off a property's value! It's such a problem, they even track sightings on a UK map!)

The mustard seed also grows more like a tree than a shrub and by saying that birds would perch in its branches, Jesus was reflecting an OT image of the messianic kingdom providing shelter for all nations (see Ezekiel 31:6; Daniel 4:20-22.) The Kingdom of God will be so extensive that people who have been living under oppression, living in darkness, will be able to find welcome shelter within, and food/hospitality that nurtures life instead of stifling it.

So when we look at the suffering in the world, at the persecution and even the decimation of Christians, such as in Sri Lanka over Easter, and we wonder where is God, we mustn't lose heart. We should remember He is

active and growing His kingdom —an ever-increasing, unstoppable kingdom - and the end game will be glorious! We might not see huge outward signs right now but mustn't be doom-mongers, because He is working to bring lasting transformation to the whole world.

WHEAT & WEEDS

The first parable we read this morning talked of wheat and weeds growing together. Now I'm not much of a gardener but I know too well that pulling up weeds can up-roots the flowers too, so I can understand why the servants were told to leave the wheat and the weeds growing together. It's even easier to understand, when we realise that a common weed amongst wheat crops in the Middle East is darnel - which, looks extremely similar to wheat...until it ripens.

Some theologians have said that Jesus was talking of the world with it's mixture of believers and non-believers. However, the biblical scriptures, being inspired by God, have a timeless context and so it's also suggested that this parable is not just about the "them" and the "us"; it also describes the church itself, being filled with true believers as well as counterfeit Christians. The wheat - the true believers - grow in faith, hope and humility, submitting to God's sovereignty in their lives. The weeds - the counterfeit Christians - look the same on the outside, they go to church, say the right things, even do good deeds...but their hearts are far from God. Like the Pharisees in Luke 11:39, they "clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside ... are full of greed and wickedness." Their motivation is self-centred not God-centred. The good news is that whereas "People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7)

Evil is intermingled with good within the church, just like everywhere else... and laws and rules and regulations can't solve the problem. The enemy still attacks both the church and society. So until the day of harvest, saints and sinners must grow alongside one another. But make no mistake - there will be a day of judgment. In Matthew 7:21 Jesus said: "Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

Modern society doesn't like "judgment" because it implies moral and ethical absolutes - things that many people do not want to consider - but those who engage in lawlessness and unrighteousness will face judgment - not our judgement but God's - His perfect judgment in His perfect timing. You see God wants all to be restored to Him - "He is patientnot wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9) Unlike weeds, people can and do change - they can repent of their sins and turn to God. He is so merciful and loving, He paid the ultimate price on the cross, so we can be forgiven. It is not for us to judge others but to demonstrate the selfless, sacrificial love of Jesus.. and by doing so, point them to Him. After all, Jesus constantly encouraged his followers to face outwards; to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13–16) and to go into all the world. The good news of the gospel is not for our own benefit but for those who we live amongst.

Our role as workers is threefold therefore:

- 1) Examine ourselves to see the integrity of our faith ; "...test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?" (2 Corinthians 13:5) and bear fruit for God.
- 2) Be vigilant, be alert - Satan's chief strategy is deception and he prowls around looking for someone to devour, so we must constantly remind ourselves of the truth by reading the Bible and hopefully, trusting a soul friend to keep us accountable.
- 3) Speak truth with compassion...we must stand firm on the teaching from the Bible. It doesn't mean judging and condemning others but rather showing forgiveness and patience. We who are Christians must share our faith and let it influence our society. Speaking out on biblical values and principles, we must challenge lies and oppose wrong world-views but we must do so with grace.

SUMMARY

Unlike 20 Questions, these parables paint vivid pictures of the Kingdom of Heaven.

1. The yeast reflects the **intensive, internal effect** of the kingdom spirit within us, penetrating the heart, gradually transforming (sanctifying) every aspect of our lives
2. The mustard seed, though seemingly small and insignificant, has an **extensive, external (outward) effect** penetrating the world around it.
3. The wheat and weeds parable demonstrates the **inclusivity of invitation to the kingdom**. By our witness, weeds can repent and believe and become wheat!

Through these parables, Jesus revolutionised the understanding of God's kingdom. The Jewish leaders viewed the Kingdom of Heaven as static, unchanging since the very beginning of time. Jesus demonstrated it is dynamic - a breaking in of God's redeeming power into the world of human affairs. It is ever expanding, one person at a time - growing whenever someone accepts the free gift of salvation, whenever someone is set free from demonic influence, or healed of illness; it's increasing wherever there is forgiveness or peace or reconciliation between peoples or nations. As more people follow His teaching - become followers of the Way (as in our last sermon series) - the Kingdom of Heaven grows.

It had a small humble beginning, planted by Jesus and his disciples. In the times to come, there will be the full realisation of God's kingdom...and in between, there is growth and transformation - of individuals and unjust structures in society - so it really is "now" and "not yet", "seen" and "unseen"!

With this in mind, perhaps each of us should be asking ourselves, "Am I kingdom ready? How am I helping the kingdom to grow?"

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