

Sunday 26th July

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Matthew 13: 31–33; 44–52

I don't watch a great deal of TV, but when I do it'll usually be a drama series. I have to confess, however, that I'm not terribly good at following plots. If I'm watching with Jeremy, we often have to press Pause and I'll say, "So ... *who* is that? Does he *know* about the letter?" So I always appreciate that bit you get at the beginning of an episode that says "Previously ... in *War and Peace* ... "

I wouldn't normally begin a sermon with "Previously ..." but it's impossible to stand up here today and not recall the previous occasion, which, as it happens, was the very last Sunday before lockdown. Previously, when the Gospel reading was the story of the woman at the well, I talked about times of isolation and of drawing aside. Observing that this was almost certainly what was about to be enforced on all of us, I finished like this:

I wonder if we can see this time of being drawn aside as a time with its own opportunity. In this suspension, this liminal space, can we be receptive to different kinds of encounter – with each other and with God? When all around is closing down, can we be open? Clearly our human encounters with each other may have to take on a different aspect, but perhaps we can be creative about our contact with other people. Under constraints, creativity can blossom, living water can flow.

I found it very strange, going back to those words four months later. In some ways it was encouraging. Because many *have* found it a time for reflection, discovery and creative response – though not everyone, of course. But the words had also acquired a poignancy, just because the world now feels like a such different and more difficult place. That's partly the direct effects of the pandemic, but it's also all the fault lines that have been exposed and tensions that have surfaced. I wonder if, like me, you find it's all just too overwhelming to contemplate.

Perhaps today, as some us are finally gathered together once more, is a good day to remind ourselves that this world order is not all there is. There is something wider, something deeper – the order of the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven, that we hear about in today's Gospel reading. Of course, that kingdom is not the one being continuously presented on our screens and airwaves. So, just how are we to think about it or, indeed, relate it to the world in which we now find ourselves? This is the question we find Jesus addressing by means of a series of parables.

In Luke's version of these parables, Jesus introduces them with some questions: "What is the kingdom of God like? To what shall we compare it?" These are pump-priming questions that invite speculation and imagination – a signal that a bit of work is needed if

we're going to get anywhere. And so, let us see if we can respond now to that invitation. These kingdom parables may well be very familiar to us. But individually and together they offer an extraordinary and rich set of images that repay revisiting.

First, then, we have the tiny mustard seed that becomes a great tree. Very obviously, the plant *we* know as mustard is not a tree, but in any case we don't really know what species Jesus had in mind. What we *do* know, however, is that at that time the mustard seed was a proverbial expression for the smallest possible seed. And so, the epitome of tiny seeds ends up as a gigantic tree. It takes its place in the ecosystem and offers shelter for other creatures.

Next, on a similar tack, we have the image of the flour and the yeast. Or more correctly, the leaven. If you're one of those who's been making sourdough bread in lockdown, you will know all about leaven – that small amount of dough with active natural yeasts which you save from one batch of bread to the next. That's the method which would be familiar to Jesus' audience, and which the breadmaker would use to make just enough to feed their household. In the parable, however, the three measures of flour equates to about 50lbs! An utterly impractical amount of dough to manage by hand, and producing enough bread to feed a whole village. Interestingly, at that time the action of leaven was a common metaphor for the exponential spread of evil. Jesus, however, turns it right round by saying that the Kingdom of Heaven works in just this way – and with spectacular results.

Then, after a bit of textual leapfrogging, we come to the man finding treasure in a field. If this parable sounds to us more like a fairy tale, it wouldn't have done to Jesus's audience. If you had no bank or safe in which to keep the family inheritance, you had to hide it somewhere – and one thing you might do was bury it. So people did sometimes discover buried treasure, and such discoveries in turn inspired rags-to-riches type folk tales. For poor people it may have been the dream that gave them day-to-day hope – rather like a lottery ticket. But whilst Jesus may be retelling a familiar story, its point is not the happy-ending riches but what the man does in order to secure them.

Similarly, it's the not the special pearl itself that is of interest. Pearls at that time could sell for the equivalent of millions of pounds in today's money – so truly it could have been the "pearl of great price". But again, the point of the story is the extraordinary lengths to which the merchant was prepared to go in to obtain it.

There are further parables in today's reading, and I am aware that I have left the tricky tale of the fish sorting to the side of the plate, as it were. But I do so safe in the knowledge that this theme was ably taken up last week by our new curate, Andrew, when he talked about the weeds and the tares. So do check back on that if you didn't hear it.

So, staying with these four images, what do they convey to us about the Kingdom of Heaven in our midst? Parables have an extraordinary potential to generate meaning – and maybe you have already seen a glint of hidden treasure. But I am briefly going to draw out three aspects that might both encourage and challenge us, and for each one I will suggest a question that we might take with us into the week ahead.

First, then, there is a prominent theme of hiddenness. Both mustard seed and treasure are buried and out of sight; the leaven is mixed into in the flour. In the Greek, the word used here is actually the word for “hidden” – the smidgen of leaven is hidden away in the vat of flour. We can probably think of many ways in which the kingdom of God is hidden. We might think of Jesus himself, who came in relative obscurity. Or we might think of the church that has grown exponentially from a small group hiding in an upper room. Or again, we might think of the way that the spirit of God is working, even now in this new uncertain world, behind the scenes and through his people.

So as we emerge into this new world, my first question is: can we look for the signs of a different order – signs of the kingdom? Like plants and pearls, it may be hidden in plain sight. Maybe we begin our day by praying, “Your kingdom come”. Can we end it by looking for signs of where it has?

Second, it also seems to me that – like needles and camels, and like logs in the eye – the sheer, wilful, playful absurdity of these parables seems designed to give our imagination the kind of jolt it needs in order to apprehend the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus may use familiar images drawn from everyday experience, from folk tales and proverbial wisdom – but then he gives each one a firm twist. Common sense is turned on its head; there is superabundance and superlative; and there is also a radicalism that challenges the way we see the world.

My question here is the hard one. Many of are already well out of our comfort zones. But as we emerge into a new world, where convention and social orders are being overturned, and where solutions to seemingly intractable problems are urgently needed, can we be those who are prepared to see with the eyes of imagination and faith, and contemplate radical alternatives?

Finally, if all that seems just too much, then we can remember that extravagant results come from modest beginnings. Everything starts small and it starts ordinary. It starts with what is to hand – a seed, some yeast, a field to be dug. These ordinary things are of course part of the folk-tale-fable world, and they help the audience to recognise and understand. But they also tell us a spiritual truth – that we can begin with faith as small as a mustard seed. If we are feeling discouraged about the world, and unsure about the part our little life could play in all this, we can start with what we have.

And so my final question: what mustard seed do we have that we could sow this week?
For who knows what kind of a tree it might eventually grow into.