

“THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE THIS”

-a sermon based on Matthew 13:31-34, 44-46, 51-52

Text: “Jesus told the crowd all these things in parables.”
(Matthew 13:34)

“You talk a great deal about ‘the kingdom of heaven’. Tell us, what is it like?”

When the followers of Jesus put that question to him, he didn't answer them with a dictionary definition. Instead, he looked around for things that were familiar to them and led them on from there to things that had not entered their minds.

(THE MUSTARD SEED)

So, for example, Jesus notices a man over there who is planting mustard seeds in his garden. Tiny seeds which in time will grow into sizeable bushes on which the birds can perch and feed. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like. When the seed of faith is planted, it grows from very small beginnings, but who knows where it will end?

William Wilberforce, a devout Anglican, happened to read an exposure of the very profitable slave trade. Some time later, his friend, Prime Minister William Pitt, said to him, “Wilberforce, why don't you introduce into the House of Commons a motion against the slave trade?” What he had read and what he now heard his friend say planted a seed in his mind. After years of persistent lobbying in Parliament, Wilberforce's tiny seed had grown into a mighty tree. A tree of compassion under which hundreds of thousands of former slaves throughout the British Empire could now lodge in freedom. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

(THE TREASURE HIDDEN IN A FIELD)

Then Jesus' eye falls on a man digging in his field, and he can imagine what it would be like if the man, to his amazement and joy, suddenly uncovered a treasure hidden in the soil. "What would you do?", Jesus asks his hearers. "Why, you'd sell everything you had in order to buy that field and the treasure in it".

Coming to faith in Jesus and believing the Good News he brings us is like discovering treasure in the soil of life. It's worth any sacrifice to stay close to Jesus and to live from now on just as we pray in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". When men and women embrace the Good News and determine to live by what they pray, that is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

(THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE)

As Jesus is speaking, a merchant about his business rides by, assessing everything with a keen professional eye. What if he's a dealer in precious stones and later today, say, after years of searching, he comes across a pearl of great value and great beauty? This is what he has been looking for all his life and this is what he must acquire. The cost may be great, but it's worth every penny.

When a person comes to understand the love that God has for him, the good that God intends for her, that discovery makes it worth offering up everything in order to respond to that love and to embrace that good. It may happen suddenly, like uncovering treasure in a field, or after many years, like the merchant searching for the pearl of great price. But when it does happen, that is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

(THE LEAVEN IN THE LOAF)

And then Jesus points to a woman at work in her kitchen. She's baking bread, as Mary did back home in Nazareth. And, like Mary, she adds to her three measures of flour a piece of dough kept specially from the last time she baked. That little piece has fermented and now it will leaven all the flour it's mixed in with. That's the mysterious and amazing power of leaven: it is able to cause the bread to rise and to make it soft and tasty and good to eat.

Like the leaven in the loaf, Jesus has the mysterious and amazing power to leaven all of life. Individual lives are being transformed by him in numbers beyond all counting. But we forget that wherever the Gospel has been preached, it has challenged the prevailing attitudes to whole groups in society – and it still does: the attitude to women, to children, to the sick, the aged, the poor, to migrants and people of color. Sometimes these challenges are bitterly resisted, often the odds against change seem heavy indeed. But the leaven continues to work. And because of that those who have faith in the transforming power of Christ have reason for hope and encouragement. As we sang right before this sermon:

“The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,
the captives are freed, the sinners find place,
the outcasts are welcomed God's banquet to share,
and hope is awakened in place of despair”.
(“The kingdom of God is justice and joy”, v.2)

“And hope is awakened in place of despair”. Last month Anne and I heard a friend of ours tell about the program, “Nets for Life”. Some time back Abigail gave a talk about global poverty at a prominent Episcopal church in New York City. When she finished her talk, a man came up to her and said he wanted to learn more at first hand

about the poverty she had described. He had his own private jet and would fly her anywhere in the world and give her eleven hours on the ground (a busy man indeed!) to make her case. So they flew to a country in Africa, drove by jeep to a remote village in the middle of the bush, the priest buzzing around, the priest praying, the child dying – and then the child dead. The man had a five-year-old daughter back home in New York, and he was devastated. Why had this child died? Why? Malaria-bearing mosquitos with no protection against them. When he heard that, a seed was sown and the leaven of God's grace began to work.

Back in New York the man told Abigail that he would give two million dollars to combat malaria. More than that, he recruited the help of a major British bank which pledged another million dollars. More than that, the bank had affiliate banks in several African countries affected by malaria and those banks also undertook to help financially. More than that (the leaven knows no bounds!) the employees of these banks were trained to teach villagers how to use anti-malarial mosquito nets, and they fanned out by jeep, in canoes, on foot to do their teaching. And the Anglican congregations in these villages played their part, too, winning the confidence of the villagers because they were known and trusted. The campaign that began with a talk in a church in New York and a man who was touched by it provided a million nets rightly called "Nets for Life". Life instead of death and hope in place of despair. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

With all those parables drawn from daily life, Jesus invites us to embrace the kingdom of heaven not as something far in the future, not distant or hard to comprehend, but as something close at hand. A gift to welcome and to live by day by day.

The mustard seed, the treasure hidden in the field, the pearl of great price, the leaven in the bread of life: "Jesus told the crowd all these things in parables". And when

he had finished, he said to his followers, “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes, yes”. And this morning what will our answer be to that same question, “Have you understood all this?”

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