

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 7th Sunday after Trinity – 26th July 2020

Service at All Saints' Marseille

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Our Gospel today brings us to the end of the great series of parables in Matthew's account, leaving us with a kaleidoscope of images to meditate on. As with a kaleidoscope, we should not seek to pin them down with rigid explanations but instead to enjoy them, allowing them to enlighten us, becoming open to new insights and patterns each time we come back to them.

'The kingdom of heaven is like...' – a mixture of the ordinary and the extraordinary. A seed planted in the ground, yeast placed in dough - small, hidden things that few people know about but which grow and become visible and striking. Then buried treasure or a priceless pearl - special and valuable things you come across by accident or spend your whole life searching for.

As we saw in earlier weeks while looking at Jesus's parables, they defy any single meaning. They come at us sideways, subtly, with images that become puzzling if we apply our minds to them too literally. For example, the mustard seed may be the smallest of seeds and grow exceptionally large, but why would anyone plant it? In Jesus's time it was a weed that was apt to grow out of control, even though it had medicinal properties. Perhaps the reference was an ironic dig at

the religious authorities – they looked on Jesus as a weed that had got into their field and needed to be pulled up. Yet nothing, not even his death, could stop the impact of his teaching and ministry from growing, and it offered shelter to everyone who sought it.

Similarly with the yeast. It has been noted that the amount of flour the woman was preparing was enormous - enough to provide bread for a hundred people. Yet leaven was associated with decay and therefore used as an image of moral corruption. Jesus himself later warns his disciples to ‘beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees’ (Matthew 16.11), which Matthew goes on to explain meant not ‘the yeast of bread, but of [their] teaching’. The teaching of Jesus was regarded by the religious authorities as corrupting, yet even a small amount of it was feeding vast numbers. The work of transformation in the hearts of those who heard the teaching, like the work of transformation in the dough and the planted seed, were of God.

Small beginnings of good things can yield a lot of fruit. Many charities have grown from the smallest of seeds. Changes in fundamental human rights have come about through the actions of individuals – Rosa Parks’s refusal to change seats on a bus helped start the US civil rights movement. Some see the key to the parable of the mustard seed in its reference to a tree in which birds make their nests. In the Old Testament trees with nesting birds were sometimes used to refer to empires (Judges 9.7-15, Ezekiel 17.1-10, Daniel 4.10-12). Was Matthew offering encouragement that, although his original hearers were living under the oppression of the Roman Empire, the kingdom of God would ultimately overcome it?

The small seeds of beginning are present in our lives too. Small acts of kindness and generosity can bear fruit that we may never see. The breaking-in of the kingdom of heaven in the here and now, offering transformation and hope. But growth is mysterious, and sometimes we don't know what will promote it and what will not.

The parables about treasure buried in a field and the pearl of great price are, on one level, to do with the response required of us in order to receive the gift offered to us in Christ. Some, like Matthew's Magi, go looking for it. Others, like the first disciples, encounter it unexpectedly. The emphasis is on the value of what is found, if we are open to the invitation.

The kingdom requires a change of heart in us. Earlier in Matthew's account Jesus says 'where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' It asks of us what we truly value, and how it will affect the way we live our lives now. And it also offers us joy – not dutiful seriousness but the word that rings out through Matthew's Gospel: the 'joy' of the Magi returning from Bethlehem; the 'joy' of the women returning from the empty tomb on Easter morning. It's a recurring theme, part of the freeing from other entanglements that characterises the response to Christ's call. Nets left on the beach, Matthew's tax booth left unattended. Being prepared to leave behind all we have – mentally, spiritually, even physically - in order to possess what is priceless. R S Thomas puts it like this in his poem *The Bright Field*:

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way

and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it.

Yet might there be another possible reading of these two parables? What if we turn them upside down? Could it be that the merchant seeking the pearl is God, and the pearl is us? God in Christ sells everything that God has to earn the pearl that is of great price to him. Could this be a parable that in two verses gives us the whole Gospel? The same might be said of the treasure - that it's a story of how God relates to us, searching for us and, in Christ, giving up everything for us. The conviction which Paul expressed in his Letter to the Romans - in words that often bring comfort to us in times of trouble – that 'neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'.

These are the many-layered glimpses of the kingdom of heaven which Jesus left with his followers, and on which they meditated in the years that followed his ministry until they were written down. How do we feel, now that we have come to the end of our reading of them? Parables speak to us at a spiritual level. They are not sets of facts, or moral tales. It's all right to be puzzled by them, to admit we are not certain what they mean. Truth often comes to us in mystery. And we have to live with uncertainty - something these last months have reminded us in ways we would never have guessed a year ago. But the parables offer us that tantalising invitation to live in harmony with God's ways. What matters is

to keep our minds open to God's invitation, God's call on our lives, and for us each to respond as only we can do. The kingdom of heaven cannot be analysed or pinned down. It lies the interface between the human and the divine, and it is holy ground.

Perhaps the message of these parables may be summed up in the words of one commentator: 'God is here, and glimpses of heaven surround us, if only we will open our eyes and our hearts to receive the gift.'¹

Amen.

¹ John D Rohrs, *Feasting on Matthew*, p. 403.