

## Sermon 24 July – Kingdom parables<sup>1</sup>

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight,  
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Amen

**First, a warning: This sermon contains a Test (with a capital T). Please don't be polite! Don't get comfortable! Think outside the box!**

### **Introduction**

Curiously, we can begin with the end of the Gospel reading to provide a background to this sermon. Jesus says to the disciples “*every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old*”. He is telling the disciples that the parables we are about to explore together are not simply another presentation of the Old Testament with which the faithful of Jesus’ day were well versed, but something different, something new to be added to the existing understanding.

As John the Baptist preached (Matthew 3), Jesus was bringing the Kingdom of God near to earth: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*” But this was not the Kingdom as everyone expected it – there was something (well, quite a lot) new.

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<sup>1</sup> Sources include sermon notes by Gary DeLashmutt and Chris Hamer-Hodges

Now I confess that I struggled with this sermon, probably because I set off with the naive notion that I would be able to use the parables to draw something of a coherent and complete picture of the Kingdom ... I hoped that the parables could be broken down into something of a do-it-yourself Kingdom Kit. An Ikea instruction booklet.

Now I don't know about you, but the five parables we heard in our Gospel reading don't leave me feeling that I have got this Kingdom of God thing taped ...

The trouble is that we tend to misunderstand parables – they are illustrations, not encyclopaedias. So if you are awake and prepared to go on a little journey this afternoon, we will therefore explore together just a few elements of the Kingdom of God – but which are really key – and which I hope will improve our picture of the Kingdom of God which our Lord Jesus brought near.

We will look at the five stories of the Gospel reading, which fall into two sections:

I      Essential features of The Kingdom of God

- A.      It is surprising – the Gruffalo
- B.      It is wonderful – better than winning the lottery (?)

And then we will consider the road to the Kingdom of God:

II      Getting there

- A.      Sacrifice (what – I have to pay?)
- B.      Continuous assessment ... (last minute preparers of sermons beware)

**I Surprises**

**A “Good? Don’t call me good, I’m the scariest creature in this wood”**

**[Hand out mustard seeds]**

The first aspect of the Kingdom which we see in these parables is that it starts hidden, it starts small. When you think about it each of the five parables involves something very small or intangible or hidden:

- The mustard seed like the one my little helpers are distributing to you is the most obvious example, and the most easily understandable;
- The yeast which the woman mixed into the flour. I don't know if you have ever made bread, but yeast is mysterious stuff ... Note also (according to the version of the bible you are reading) that she "hid" (NIV's "mixed" obscures this point) the yeast in the dough;
- The treasure which the man discovered was hidden in a field;
- The pearl needed searching for and was therefore not immediately available or apparent;
- Even the fish in the final parable started off hidden from our view in the sea ...

Next, the small or hidden thing develops in a surprising manner. And Jesus emphasises this development by exaggerating the size of the mustard "tree" (if you plant your mustard seed, you'll see it grows into a pretty impressive bush, but not really a tree) and telling a story about an unusual amount of flour - the amount of flour involved here represents roughly fifty pounds, providing enough bread for over one hundred people.

The unnatural magnitude of the illustrations Jesus chose suggests that the Kingdom He is describing far exceeds daily examples to which it may be compared.

Being hidden and small were not qualities that people expected or wanted of the promised Kingdom - they were expecting the Messiah, but had decided that he would be a great politician, a great general, to free his people from the earthly oppression of the invading Roman forces ... an acorn, not a mustard seed, a huge cream cake, not the yeast.

Still, we can see the hard evidence of the truth of this parable - Jesus began as one man. He was from an insignificant backwater town. His brief three-year public ministry apparently ended in complete failure: rejected by his people, betrayed by one of his disciples, deserted by the rest, condemned by Rome, and erased by the most ignominious form of execution.

But after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, there were 120 followers. Not bad going by earthly standards. They were however hardly the kind of people you would expect to start a worldwide movement—blue-collar workers who came from the wrong part of Israel and had no formal education, military might, or political clout.

Yet by the end of the book of Acts, Christ's good news has spread all over the northern Mediterranean Basin as far as Rome. And by the end of the first century (less than 70 years later), the Christian movement had spread to over 1 million people, predominantly non-Jewish, as far west as Spain, as far north as Britain, as far east as India, and as far south as North Africa.

And as we know, it didn't stop there.

One man, but not just a man – the mustard seed of God's Kingdom.

We know therefore that the Kingdom of God starts small, both in our lives and in the world, with one man laying down his life for God's will, but the result is that the whole man, the whole earth is filled.

In each of us, the Kingdom began small, and as we progress it grows in us. We need to throw ourselves completely behind whatever it is that God is doing through us whether it seems great or small. For that is how the Kingdom grows.

Keep hold of that mustard seed as a reminder of what YOU are called to become.

### **B Winning the lottery**

The Kingdom of God is the greatest thing of value we can hope for – nothing comes close (certainly not the lottery – trust me). Yet it is a treasure that is hidden and unknown to many. They just do not understand what it is that we get so excited about. They cannot see its true value. But when that moment of revelation does come, when someone responds to the gospel and finally understands all that Christ has done for them and all that they can now have in him, it is a moment of great joy and excitement.

Who found a treasure box on their pew when they arrived this afternoon ?

If you didn't find one, what do you think you should do (remember, this is a test) ?

### **Find remaining treasure boxes**

Does everyone have a treasure box ? Is everyone happy – nay, joyous ? How much greater do you imagine that pleasure will be when you hold the true treasure of the Kingdom of God in your hands ?

Both treasure parables express the joy of the finder. But Jesus wasn't packing his sermon by telling the same story twice – each gives a slightly different angle, and tells us something different.

In the first story, like those of you who nearly sat on your treasure boxes when you came in this afternoon, the man stumbled upon the treasure. But in the second, like the rest of you a moment ago, the finder had been seeking when he found the treasure.

The parables can be seen at the individual level (for each of us individually) and on a collective level (La Cote, our communities, the world).

[Hand out pearls]

Save that pearl as a reminder of what you have been given.

## **II Getting there**

### **A Sacrifice – “what, I have to pay ?”**

If both treasure parables speak of the joy at finding something of great value, they also tell us that the finder gave everything he had for that treasure.

So what is Jesus saying to us with this part of the parables? He is saying that the Kingdom cannot just be tacked on as another appendage to our previous way of life. If we want to receive it we have to be willing to give everything else up. I don't believe that that necessarily means selling up and moving into a monastic community, but it does mean putting God before all else.

But if we have truly seen the worth and its value of the Kingdom, we will be willing to do that and not even consider it a sacrifice because of all that we are gaining – it is a question of perspective.

Those who desire worldly wealth and status but are far less consumed with the furtherance of God's Kingdom will not make the sacrifice. It is a tough message, but the price we are required to pay is high – at least on our worldly scale of values.

But in the parable, although this treasure (the kingdom), is hidden to most of the world, not only does the man recognize that its value outweighs all he has, but he acts accordingly. He understood, and the price didn't feel too high.

And for those of you who were more like the man in the field than the merchant, it is not because you found the treasure by the grace of God without apparent effort that you can hold onto it without cost ... True, the Kingdom is available to us only by grace through faith; but genuine faith means genuinely embracing and yielding to God's reign, not simply acknowledging it and then passing it by as if it did not exist.

Our relationship with the Kingdom is dynamic – unfortunately, unlike the merchant and the man who bought the field, our story doesn't stop with the discovery of the Kingdom. As verses 47 – 50 show us, the judgment is not yet ... and there is so much to distract us between now and the finishing line.

### **B Continuous Assessment – you have been warned ...**

Last week, Rev C preached about judgement being a thing of the future, and that as a consequence we should be slow to judge others. Today I'd like to look at that same point, but turn it back on ourselves. The parable of the net tells us that indeed judgement is a thing of the future – but if we are to make the cut, we need to start looking at ourselves now, and to keep doing it. A single sacrifice for the kingdom may be insufficient: "It ain't over 'til it's over."

This is the tough bit. Many of us know God's grace, and have experienced its life-changing impact on our lives. But somewhere along the line (and I know this well in my own life), it's easy to stop growing in our understanding and appreciation of God's grace. Other things—including good things (like parenting, marriage, job ...)—can become more important to us than this. And gradually, the excitement of knowing Jesus' love fades, and the Christian life becomes a duty rather than a delight.

Of at least twenty-four species of fish counted in the Lake of Galilee, many were unclean or inedible, and the net would not discriminate in its catch. Until the final day, Jesus will continue eating with sinners to seek and save the lost. Only the final judgment will reveal who was truly committed to the kingdom and how wise the committed were to invest their lives in it – until then we need to keep running – or maybe swimming ...

So this is a two sided coin, or a double edged sword if you're feeling fiery ... If you have not yet been saved, there is still time – and if you have glimpsed or even held the Kingdom of God, there is still time to lose it. Don't slip into the mistake of thinking that the "Good fish" refers to people who do lots of righteous deeds, and that the "Bad fish" refers to people who do lots of wicked deeds. That is a judgement you would be making now. Jesus makes it very clear that the "good fish" may include people who have done very wicked things, while the "bad fish" may include people who have done no outwardly wicked things and lots of outwardly good things. How can this be?

The answer is that only thing that counts is being declared right with God. None of us can attain this verdict by our own works, because all of us fall short of his perfect standard. But we can be declared right with God through faith in Jesus, no matter how



unrighteously we have lived. This is because Jesus died to pay the full penalty for our sins—so when we humbly entrust ourselves to him for this, God declares us “righteous” on the basis of Jesus’ payment.

Let’s finish this section by going back to the parable, to the end of the reading, and the beginning of this sermon. The separation of the “good” from the “bad” is “old” information – the Old Testament had been saying this would happen. What is the new information? That at this point in God’s kingdom, it will gather both true believers in Jesus and people who don’t truly believe in him. A dragnet gathers both edible and inedible fish—they only get sorted out after the net is brought ashore and workers separate the fish.

I began this sermon with the warning that there would be tests. You did a reasonably good job of hunting for treasure boxes (or at least the kids did ... now – who said that would happen?) The parable of the net is Jesus’ warning of the impending “test” of our lives....

**[hand out fish]**

Although Jumbo didn’t sell two-sided fish, I hope you will remember that this one has two sides ... you have time to be saved, but also time not to make the cut.

## **Conclusion**

Take a look at your starter kit:

The Kingdom brought near by Jesus was not what people expected, it did not arrive in a blaze of glory and trumpets, it had not consumed the wicked with fire. (Your matchbox treasure box is a pretty unlikely spiritual object). Rather the Kingdom

invaded the world in a hidden way and would remain hidden until the end. It started small (you have your mustard seed), but it grew and continues to grow in different ways and in different places until there is nothing bigger or of more value (just like your pearl).

When God's angels pull in the great dragnet one day, and the fish are sorted, that is what will distinguish the good from the rubbish --not a man's wealth, not his power and glory in this world, not how often he came to church, but whether his heart is right with God. His heart will be right with God when he sacrifices everything – when he puts God first. The fish in your box are a reminder of this.

David will lead us in our intercessions as we pray that we will remember this and respond to God's call as He wants.

Amen