



Sermon: - 30th July 2017

Metaphors and Similes

Romans 8:26-39, Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

Today's gospel reading is all about Similes and Metaphors ...

What is the kingdom of heaven like? Jesus kept talking about the kingdom of heaven; we are accustomed to that phrase, we think we know what it means – it's so familiar to us that it doesn't strike us with the same force as it would have Jesus' listeners in 1st century Palestine. But when you think about it, it is a curious metaphor. When Jesus spoke about his purpose here on earth, and the new life into which he was inviting his listeners, he had to give some substance to it and so he spoke of a kingdom, which was a concept easily understood. After all, human society has always been organised in kingdoms of one sort or another. However, like many metaphors, it is imperfect. The kind of kingdoms experienced by 1st century society where, in the main, kingdoms of oppression and more often than not engaged in conflict with neighbouring kingdoms. So, he starts with the concept of a kingdom, that is, an organisation of society, ruled over by a King. A metaphor which makes some kind of sense. It's easy enough to see that this kingdom is ruled by God and therefore will be different from the other kingdoms in the experience, but in what way will it be different? So, tell us, what is the kingdom of heaven like? But Jesus, as always, does not give straight answers.

And this is the sign of a good teacher. The best teachers enable us to find out things for ourselves, rather than telling us. We are more likely to remember something we have to work at finding out than something we are simply told.

Today Jesus gives us five similes to explain aspects of the kingdom of heaven, but we have to work out for ourselves what they mean, what they tell us about God's Kingdom. We have to listen hard, and think hard ... perhaps that's what Jesus meant when he said, as he so often did, those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

As it happens, none of today's little parables have that closing line. But the fact that Jesus so often uses that phrase is significant and important when it comes to all the parables.

Jesus is inviting his hearers to listen, discern, seek to understand, interpret what he is intending through his parables. 'Delve deeply', he is saying, 'what is this wee story saying to you'!

Are we listening? Do we hear?

The first simile of course is the mustard seed. The "smallest of all seeds," the mustard seed grows into a tree (Matthew 13:32). I wasn't convinced that a mustard seed actually could grow into a tree so I did a bit of research and discovered that the black mustard seed can grow into a bush up to 3 metres high. Even the yellow mustard plant can grow up to 2 metres high. And in winter, the branches of the mustard bush become stiff and birds can indeed roost in it. The other slightly odd thing in this little parable is that Jesus calls the mustard seed, "the smallest of seeds." It's not in fact the smallest of seeds however in the time of Jesus this phrase, this image was often used to describe something that was very small. It was a common saying which his listeners would have been familiar with. So, in this simile, Jesus is telling us that actually, size doesn't matter! From very humble beginnings, great things can grow, and what's more, can provide a home and a place of refuge for many. This would have been encouraging for the disciples and it's also encouraging for us. It means that all our efforts, no matter how tiny, can be part of this great endeavour, building the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. Every prayer we say, every word of encouragement we utter, every kind and thoughtful act, are all part of this growth of the kingdom of God. The other thing to notice about this parable is that the mustard bush was actually a kind of weed. As you can see from the picture, it was messy and misshapen. I wonder if it's stretching this simile too far to suggest that the kingdom of God may be like this, messy and untidy, not neat and pristine as we might like it to be. Rather, it's okay for things to be messy, and if indeed all are welcome then it is very likely to be messy and that's just fine with Jesus.

The next simile is that of yeast. Notice that Jesus says that the yeast is worked all through the dough, in fact the word used here is hid, the yeast was hid in the dough and I think that is significant. The work done by the yeast is unseen, we could possibly even call it subversive, changing the flour by its presence. And once the yeast is integrated into the dough, and only then, will the dough rise; this small lump of dough will double in size. The kingdom of heaven then, might be hidden, might be subversive, might work in unseen ways, but it will make a significant difference, as it permeates every aspect of life. Let's stretch this metaphor just a little bit further. Bread without yeast is dense and flat and,

frankly a bit dull. Bread with yeast is light and much more appetising. In the same way, the kingdom of God can bring light and savour to life. And, to take it in a slightly different direction we are like the yeast. We are that ingredient that infiltrates the world, making a difference by our very presence, bringing light and savour to life. And the yeast is not doing anything particularly difficult, is just doing what comes naturally. And in the same way, by living our Christian lives, by praying and worshipping and just being part of the world, we too make a difference.

And the third simile, hidden treasure. What is unique about this simile? The fact that it speaks of joy. The kingdom of heaven is like finding hidden treasure because it brings joy. In the parable Jesus speaks of a man who, "...in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys the field" (13:44). The man that Jesus describes is so filled with joy that he risks everything he has to obtain more. In this way, Jesus tells us, finding the kingdom of heaven is not simply finding joy; it is a joy that is worth everything that you own, all that you have.

The fourth simile introduces us to a pearl merchant. At first glance, this seems very similar to the previous example, but I think there is a difference. Jesus says, "...on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:46). Like the man who finds the hidden treasure, the pearl merchant sells all that he has to purchase this one pearl of great price. However, in this simile there is the sense of deliberately seeking something. The treasure in the field, is stumbled across, found by accident. In this simile, the pearl merchant is going about his daily business, buying and selling pearls. He would not be a good pearl merchant if he was not looking for good and outstanding pearls. So, he is just doing his job, but he is deliberately seeking. In these two parables Jesus teaches that the kingdom of heaven is a treasure; it is valuable and something to be valued. But also, Jesus seems to tell us that the kingdom of heaven must be sought. We might stumble across it, but how much more likely are we to find it if we actually, actively seek it. And it is worth seeking, and finding it will give us great joy.

And in the fifth simile Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a net. The net "caught fish of every kind, when it was full they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad" (Matthew 13:47-48). This parable takes us back to the readings from last week, and the idea that the weeds and the wheat grow up side-by-side. It also echoes the first simile in telling us that there is room for everyone. Good and bad fish are caught in the net and the separation doesn't happen until after they're both brought

ashore. We are the fish rather than the fishermen, it's not our job to do the sorting, we are caught in the net, caught up in the kingdom of heaven. And notice that the net contained various kinds of fish. And there is no sense in which the bad fish are all one kind of fish, or the good fish are all one kind of fish. All the fish are gathered in, and then the good and the bad separated out from one another. So, the kingdom of heaven is inclusive. As it says on our poster on the notice board outside the church, all sorts are welcome. That also fits with the first simile, in a church where all are welcome things may well get messy.

So, to sum up, what is the kingdom of God like? It is unexpected, it is often unseen, hidden. It can be subversive. It is found in ordinary places, sometimes by accident but also because people are actually searching for it. It is worth our whole lives, for as Paul tells us, neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Praise God for allowing us into his kingdom, for asking us to work with him to expand his kingdom. Let our sincere prayer be, "thy kingdom come".