

Sermon Notes from 10 am service 25 July 2010

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

### The Kingdom of Heaven

To hear the words of Jesus about the kingdom of heaven is to realise that there is a gulf between where he is and where we are. His words carry authority; it is impossible to deny that he speaks of what he knows, and comes from a different place from us. He belongs to the kingdom of heaven, but we live in the secular city. His words are disturbing because they remind us of what we would like, but do not have – something of inestimable value. ‘The kingdom of heaven is like treasure which a man found buried in a field – so in joy he went and sold everything he had and bought the field’. The kingdom of heaven is the highest level of human aspiration. Amazingly, it is on offer to us and it worth sacrificing everything to acquire it.

Jesus addresses us as men and women whose natural home is the kingdom of God. His starting –point is that all of us are of infinite value, who will be held eternally in the memory of God. The fact that he speaks to us about the kingdom of heaven corresponds to this conviction about who we are. ‘What is man’, asked the psalmist, ‘that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you regard him? You have made him a little lower than the angels to crown him with honour and worship’. The same thought is picked up in the letter of Paul to the Romans, our reading today: ‘the created universe is waiting with eager expectation for God’s children to be revealed....to be freed from the shackles of mortality and to enter upon the glorious liberty of the children of God. We to whom the spirit is given....look forward eagerly to our adoption, our liberation from mortality.’

The bible has an incorrigibly high view of the nature of human beings, which of course directly conflicts with the views of some prominent current thinkers. The fascination of the words of Jesus about the kingdom of heaven is that he puts before us a concept of human identity and destiny that we want to claim for ourselves. Paul again: ‘those whom God knew even before they were born, he ordained to share the likeness of his Son, so that he might be the eldest among a large family of brothers and sisters’. Our destiny is to be part of the family of Christ.

And so we come to the images of the kingdom of heaven in today's reading from Matthew. First the mustard seed and the yeast. It helps to understand that the translation in Matthew 'the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, or a portion of yeast, is actually misleading. It should be not 'the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed', but 'what happens with the kingdom of heaven is like what happens to mustard seed'. This is clear in the way Jesus introduces the parable in Mark's gospel, where he says: 'how shall we picture the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use to describe it – it is like a mustard seed etc. The purpose of both parables is to compare how the kingdom of God moves from tiny beginnings to a miraculously great outcome. The grain of mustard seed is a proverbial Jewish expression for a minute quantity. In Palestine, a mustard plant is sown in the field, not in the garden, and reaches a height of eight to ten feet. Again in the symbolism of the day, the birds which come and roost among its branches stand for the non-Jewish nations. So what does the parable mean?

The purpose of both parables is to contrast the smallness of the beginning with the greatness of the outcome. So we are shown the mustard-seed (described in Mark's version as the least of the seeds that are upon the earth) and the tiny portion of yeast which leavens bread for 150 people. We naturally think about a biological process, but that's not what would have meant to Jesus' audience. They focussed on the contrast between the beginning and the end. You start with the dead seed and miraculously end with a tree providing shelter. It is no accident that the seed is chosen as the image of the kingdom, because the seed in the new testament is the image of the resurrection – the symbol of the mystery of life coming out of death. In John 12,24 Jesus describes himself as the seed which has to fall into the ground and die in order to produce a harvest and goes on to describe this sequence as the guiding principle for our life decisions: "Unless a seed falls into the ground and dies, it remains that and nothing more; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest. People who love themselves are lost, but those who hate themselves in this world will be kept safe for eternal life". So the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast proclaim that 'by a miraculous power, from the most insignificant beginnings, from the poor little band of Jesus' disciples, out of nothing, God was causing his kingdom to grow' (Jeremias parables 90). The appearance of Jesus, his preaching and

healing, hardly seemed to usher a new age. Yet it does (Manson 123). It starts a process which MUST go on to its inevitable end. The message of the two parables is that the kingdom of God is at hand, that God's hour is approaching. Out of nothing, in spite of all appearances, God is bringing in his kingdom. The one thing necessary is to take the power of God into account despite all outward appearance.

Taking the power of God into account despite all outward appearances is not a bad description of a Christian and of the assumption we seek to operate on as a church and as individuals. We are given neither certainty nor proof; we live by the unproven faith that the kingdom of heaven towards which we strive is a treasure, an objective whose values dwarf all other objectives. But this does involve behaving in a counter intuitive way – making counter-intuitive choices. For example it might mean choosing a job which is not the best paid available or the most prestigious, because other values are overriding; many people in this church did that. It will certainly affect the way we choose to use our time and the way we relate to everyone we meet. On any secular analysis, the way we in KURC behave individually and as a group, is not calculated to change the world; but we are locked in to an inexorable process of change initiated by God in the life of Jesus. Human beings are divided (set apart) by their response to the challenge of the kingdom of heaven. I remember talking to a young friend who was considering whether or not to be confirmed. After some inconclusive preliminaries I said 'it depends which side you're on'. My friend decided to be confirmed and later worked for Amnesty International.

Matthew's reading for today ends with a parable about the end of time when the difference between good and the worthless lives becomes clear. That verdict is not based on religious belief or observance, but on how we have lived. There is a common misunderstanding outside the church about what exactly we are saying about life. The churches have been responsible for the idea that religious life is all about future rewards or future punishment. But the loss suffered by human beings if they waste the time of their lives is not a distant final judgement. It is the loss in this life of the irreplaceable treasure which brings joy - the pearl of great price. We follow the lifestyle of Jesus, and advocate it to others, not for altruistic reasons, but because it is the secret of a fulfilled life.

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