

Matthew 13:31-33; ³¹ He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³² Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

³³ He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds^[a] of flour until it worked all through the dough."

Matthew 13:44-52: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

⁴⁵ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

⁴⁷ "Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸ When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹ This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹ "Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked.

"Yes," they replied.

⁵² He said to them, "Therefore 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."

A flock of Parables

The Dead Sea Scrolls, found in Qumran, near the Dead Sea between 1946 and 1956, was a haul of 15000 scrolls or scroll fragments, found in caves, left by a religious community that existed between about 3rd century BC to first century AD. It is the most extraordinary and helpful archaeological find, which I would love to talk about a little more. But one of those scrolls was different — instead of papyrus or parchment it was made of copper. And instead of holding religious texts, it contained directions to where the community's gold and silver was hidden. It was, literally, a treasure map. It's incredibly Indiana Jones kind of stuff. But don't go getting ideas about selling everything to buy tickets to Israel and hunting down that treasure — because people have tried it. It's all gone, or beyond finding.

This leads to the interesting historical question: if you have money and you want to keep it safe, what do you do? Kings have guards and palaces, but for others there were no banks, so you put your money in a pot, and buried it somewhere that you could remember, but which would remain otherwise hidden — just the way pirates did in Treasure Island and other stories. This is the essential background knowledge you need for one of Jesus's flurry of parables in his ongoing parable fest in Matthew 13.

We have heard recently about the sower, and about the wheat and the tares — both of which he explained. But Jesus did not stop there. He goes on to compare the Kingdom of Heaven to a mustard seed, and to leaven, like a man finding treasure in a field, and a merchant finding a pearl of great worth, and fishers catching good fish and bad alike. These are not like the major stories — the prodigal, the samaritan, the workers in the vineyard, but, as I have said before, they each contain a small surprise and they each talk about God's reign, in a slightly different way.

A mustard seed is of course not the smallest of all seeds, but it is proverbially small. It does not grow into the greatest of all trees — but it becomes a large shrub. What's the point? The point to Jesus's listeners was not to expect God's kingdom to come suddenly, with dark skies, claps of thunder and God's sudden arrival. The beginning is almost insignificant, he says — but it will increase enormously — spectacularly!

He indicates this growth a second time — this time by comparing the way a small bit of the old dough, mixed in with the new, allows all the bread to rise. Jesus's imagery suggests a woman baking domestically, but making enough bread to feed a hundred people. Still, a tiny bit of leaven can transform all the dough.

What's the difference between the first image to the second? The mustard seed is an image purely of growth, but the leaven is an image of transformation. God's kingdom, like that leaven, will change everything, everywhere, even despite its tiny beginnings. There's something else though. Leaven is often used in Jesus's teaching as an image of evil — the way that can spread. It's a strong image that captures the way that feuds can erupt from words into violence, or political tensions into war with massive growth. But here it is a purely positive image — God's kingdom will also spread in this way — God's goodness is more than equal in its power to grow and transform.

Now we have a man finding treasure in a field. That treasure is trove — it's his by right, but to avoid all debate he cashes in everything he has to own that field, to be utterly sure of the treasure. And what about us? Some of us stumble upon our faith in Christ, but the free gift of God's love, grace and goodness is not to be trifled with — we put it before all else in our lives and value it above all, to be sure of really owning it. Finding God's kingdom is that joyful, that wonderful!

Now, again, we have a merchant finding a pearl of great price. Just the same story again? Not quite — our worker in the field had no idea he would find treasure. The merchant is actively searching. This is the person who is actively searching for the meaning in their life — philosopher, religious enquirer, whatever. This one has dabbled in this religion and that, but when he finds God's kingdom there is now debate — this is the finest of all pearls, and he will give everything away in order to have this one. There is no need for spares when you have the best!

And finally we have a catch of fish. It works a bit like the wheat and the tares parable of last week — there is a decision point, and sorting. Is this only a fishing version of that first parable, for those not familiar with agriculture? Perhaps? But the close succession of parables here gives a shifting focus, from the human to the divine, from happenstance, to active searching, to the action of God in selecting.

Luke 15 is the chapter that holds the three lost parables in one place — a lost sheep is helpless and needs to be found by a good shepherd. A lost coin is so helpless it cannot know it needs finding but is found and rejoiced over anyway. A lost son, on the other hand, knows well how lost he is, and chooses to return to his father. It is a chapter that presents the 'both/and' of faith. We choose Jesus and his way, but also Jesus chooses us. The same may be said of this torrent of parables — Jesus shows us a succession of different images, each of which makes a different point, but together they articulate a sense of God's rule growing from quiet beginnings to greatness, transforming the world, being stumbled upon, searched for, and being the product of God's active invitation and selection.

The kingdom of Heaven is like none other, then. It has no borders, all are free to enter and take up citizenship, its laws are those of love alone, and in that love, this kingdom is a place that will at last have no imperfections — it will be out and out good.

There is enormous hope and joy in this presentation of God's kingdom, but there is a challenge too: that central image of treasure trove quietly asks us how invested we are in the kingdom. Peter, and Andrew, James and John and Paul and many more went all in on that treasure, and the witness of thousands of Christians since suggests that this uncompromising embrace of God's kingdom, the treasure of great price, is the best way. The challenge then, is whether you and I have gone all in. Are we yet realising our best lives, by wholly following the best way?

Amen.

SDG.