

Proper 12A, July 26, 2020, St. Anne's

Genesis 29:15-28: Psalm 105:1-11, 45b: Romans 8:26-39: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

The kingdom of heaven is like.... well, there are so many images of the Kingdom in this week's Gospel it's hard to know where to begin. We're told of its similarity to a mustard seed, the yeast that leavens bread, hidden treasure gained through somewhat unethical means, a fine pearl bought with everything you have, a net cast into the sea catching fish of every kind. If you've been hanging around church for any length of time these are probably all familiar sounding images – especially the tiny mustard seed growing into a great tree. Ah yes, we say, “great things can come from tiny inauspicious beginnings,” or, “God can do something wonderful with even the tiniest bit of faith”. Which is, of course, absolutely true. Put like that it kind of sounds like a proverb doesn't it? Which should be our first clue that this is probably **not** the point Jesus is making here. Because this is a *parable*, and **parables** are subversive. So, to hear the voice of **Jesus** in these parables, we need to hear them as disturbing and challenging, *not* reassuring and comforting.

The first thing we need to know when trying to understand these parables is that neither mustard seeds nor yeast were viewed *positively* in Jesus' world. When I hear the word 'mustard' what comes to mind first is a yellow condiment usually used on things like hot dogs. But the Middle Eastern peasants of Jesus' time knew mustard as an invasive **weed**, dreaded by farmers the way today's gardeners dread crabgrass or bindweed or dandelions. Sure, it *starts out* small, but before long it's taken over your entire field and made it unsuitable for growing *anything* else.

Similarly, for *us* yeast is simply an ingredient used in baking. Living in a culture where leavened bread is common and popular, **we** miss the offense in the image and so perhaps also the power of what Jesus is saying here. But in biblical times,

yeast was seen as a *contaminant* and almost always represented the pernicious nature of *sin* when mentioned in the Bible. And in the Greek, it literally says the woman *hides* the leaven, this symbol of corruption, in the flour.

So... Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like bindweed invading your garden. Or the Kingdom of God is like a bad apple hidden in a barrel of fruit. Which begs the question - *why* would Jesus compare the kingdom of God to a pernicious weed or a pollutant?

Well, maybe because both mustard seeds and yeast have this way of spreading beyond anything we expect, infiltrating a system and taking it over. Might God's kingdom be like that? *Far* more potent than we'd imagined and ready to spread to every corner of our lives? Ready to transform **us** from the people we **are**, to the people of *God*? Would we respond differently to those routine invitations to read the Bible, pray, and come to Sunday worship if we **really** thought these things might lead to our lives being infiltrated, changed, and taken over by God's reality and rule? I could imagine these parables as a warning: "Caution! People infected by the gospel have done crazy, counter-cultural things like... sharing all they have with others, standing up for their values in school or the workplace, looking out for the underprivileged, and sharing their faith with the people around them!"

Or perhaps this is a word of encouragement for those struggling with life as it is: "Hang in there! God's new reality is closer than you think, already seeping through your life even though you might not always realize it."

These parables disrupt our expectations and comfort zones. Indeed that's the *very* reason we usually try to *domesticate* the parables and read them in a non-

threatening, reassuring way with explanations like “from a little beginning comes a great end” and skip over the offense provided by “unclean” elements like leaven and weeds. Not surprisingly, we don’t much like ‘offence’ – most of us like our life, and our church, to be ‘nice’ in a middle-class, comfortable sort of way. And Jesus is reminding us here that *whatever* the Kingdom **is** - ‘nice’ is definitely **not it!** So maybe one question this parable asks us to consider is “**who** is the leaven?” Who is “the annoying, corrupting leaven” in our society, and indeed in our **church**? Who is it that **you** would like to ‘throw out with the trash’, so that your life, ‘*your*’ church, can be comfortable and ‘nice’ and the way **you** want? Because that *very* person may well *be* the Kingdom of God at work in your life!

I suspect the people Jesus originally told this parable to would have been considered the ‘weeds and leaven’ in their society. To the wealthy, influential and powerful, the plebs are a tacky bunch you’d rather avoid but can’t because after all *someone* is needed to wash the floors, plough the fields, and dig the sewers. Well, says Jesus, I’m here to tell you that in *God’s* society things are turned upside down, and hope and possibility are found in the leavening lump, in the invasive weed. Those who are considered unclean, the dregs, the worthless are the *very ones* amongst whom the kingdom comes first.

Jesus reminds us that *God’s* ‘empire’ is not at **all** like the carefully managed, neat and well-organized *Roman* Empire. Or, indeed, like our carefully managed, neat and well-organized country of Canada. **God’s** kingdom is persistent and pervasive, creeping in through the cracks – just like a weed. A mustard bush is an image of empire that’s not ‘imperial’ in the sense of mighty and majestic and noble, like a mighty oak or the soaring ‘cedars of Lebanon’. This image of empire is subversive and frankly a bit unnerving. There’s a reason we don’t sing, ‘A mighty mustard

bush is our God.' Because truth be told, despite all its problems, most of us are far more *comfortable* with the status quo in *this* world. **God's** plans can look a bit 'dodgy' from the comfortable place where we sit. So *maybe* Jesus used this kind of language and images to offer us an alternative vision to life-as-it-is here in the worldly 'empire' we too live in - to offer us a word of *possibility*.

And far from being a place of comfort and order and security, according to theologian Darrell Guder, the church *itself* is meant to **be** a parable of this upside-down kingdom. As the Body of Christ, we are to *embody* the Kingdom by loving and accepting *everyone* and reaching out to, and caring for, those on the margins – sharing with generosity and joy the good news of God's love and compassion for the vulnerable, the poor, the homeless, the mentally ill... The Church is meant to be **alive** and growing and *bursting forth* in unexpected ways. And that means church is *not supposed* to be orderly and comfortable and stable and the way we personally like it to be. Because it's *always* filled with leaven and weeds! It's always filled with weeds like you and I.

So, the Kingdom of God is like...something with so much **life** in it that it can't be stopped. The Kingdom of God is pervasive and transformative and insistent and unstoppable. So perhaps after all, these parables are a promise: that no matter what it may look like in the moment, God's kingdom *will* prevail. And so we proclaim God's peace in the face of war. We look to God's eternal healing when confronted by illness. We proclaim love and forbearance when faced with hate and conflict. Why? Because the kingdom **is** coming and before you know it, it'll transform everything!