

The Kingdom of Heaven is like ...

(Matthew 13:24-45 preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church July 26th, 2020)

The kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of love, is like Finally, it is like something I understand – mustard seeds, yeast and pearls.

For many years each Christmas I used to make grainy mustard, I would go to spice shops to buy the seeds and then soak them in vinegar for days. Initially nothing really happened, but then, after a few days they would have swollen and soaked up most of the vinegar. I then blended them with honey and spices and they were bottled. This process released the flavour of the seeds and enhanced the flavour of foods they were matched with. Mustard seeds, small, growing and eventually packing a punch or in Jesus parable large enough to be a shelter for the birds.

I also used to make mine own bread. The tiny grains of yeast added to and worked through the dough to make crusty bread. Sometimes I used a bottle of beer, you couldn't even see the yeast in it but it worked its magic as well. Homemade bread was soon matched to homemade soup. Yeast – small, hidden but transforming the dough when it was placed in a warm place.

I now own 4 strings of pearls – my grandmother's, my aunt's, my mother's and my own. My grandfather would go out and buy a string for all of us, on our 21sts. I knew nothing about this tradition until the night he gave mine to me. At this stage he wasn't in the best of health, was as deaf as a doorpost, didn't really know much about the Melbourne city streets but he went off anyway to buy them. I treasured that string of pearls. as much for the effort he went to, to get them, as the actual value of them. When my string was stolen in a burglary, I would have sold everything to retrieve them. Years later my brother replaced that strand.

Jesus speaks of mustard seeds, yeast and pearls, part of a series of parables he uses to describe the kingdom of heaven.

So first let us take the parable of the mustard seed. A gardening parable, a parable for the farmer, a parable for the men folk. In this story we hear how the smallest of seeds becomes a great tree where birds build their nests. This parable is about abundance, from a small seed grows a great place in which many can shelter. This is not a story of some great miracle but rather a story of slow and ordinary growing.¹ If we provide nourishment for it, it will grow and come alive and in turn provide shelter again and again.

And now the parable of the yeast. A parable for the women folk. Women who baked the bread. A parable about transformation, as the yeast leavens the dough, the seemingly lifeless becomes alive and is transformed to nourishment. Again, like the mustard seed transformation, it takes time and warmth.²

And now the parable of the pearl. A parable for those who use their skill and undertake dangerous work to find these little gems. I have stood outside the Paspaly shop in Darwin and have seen how I would have had to have sold almost everything I owned to have one in my possession. A parable for one who is prepared to give up everything to

¹ Gustavo Gutierrez 'Sharing the word through the Liturgical Year' p, 276

² ibid

possess it, knowing it would be worth every last cent. The kingdom of God, life lived in communion with God is this precious, you would give up everything to participate.

These are all stories about what life with God in the present can be like.

- a) The provision of shelter, safety and a place to be at home in.
- b) Hidden things working away to transform.
- c) Small actions leading to great effects.
- d) Seeing such joy in another is worth giving up some things for.

I wonder if that was what Jesus meant when he told these parables. These understandings make sense, they are understandable, but nothing particularly shocking in them, not enough for Jesus to be hounded and killed for. They are just a little bit gentle for a radical preacher.

Let's dig a little deeper.³

1. Mustard seeds – the original hearers of this parable would have been aghast at the thought of the kingdom of heaven being likened to a mustard seed. In that part of the world, mustard plants were invasive plants, almost weeds. Perhaps they were sown out of desperation, in the hope that the farmer might get some income out of the land. It might also even make the land unusable for anything else. And that friend is exactly what Jesus was trying to convey – the kingdom of heaven is meant to be invasive, to grow and grow to eventually be big enough for others to find shelter and rest in it.
2. Yeast – the original hearers of this parable wouldn't have used yeast. They ate flat breads, and especially during religious festivals their bread was unleavened. Yeast back then and now was difficult to handle, it needs just the right amount or it might ooze everywhere, it needs warmth and it works away secretly, hidden, until it transforms the host environment.
3. Pearls – the little gems that Paspaly sells for a fortune start out as sand inside an oyster shell, the sand causes an irritation and over time becomes a beautiful gem. In the early days they were very difficult to harvest – maybe you have seen the suits pearl luggers used to wear to dive down and find the shells. Many men lost their lives doing this. A dangerous task. The Kingdom of heaven starts out as a small irritation and is dangerous to find and in turn is very valuable.

The kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of love is a little bit different when we read these parables differently.

The kingdom of heaven/God for which we pray in the Lord's prayer is organic, transformative, unpredictable, uncontrollable, it appears suddenly, it is subversive, it is challenging, it is irritating, it grows in secret, that is the kind of love we pray to be present here on earth as it is in heaven.

If we are to live out that prayer how might we work in transforming the life of others?

To whom are our arms outstretched in welcome? Who are we welcoming into a place of warmth, of shelter and safety? How can we use our buildings and space to provide shelter for others?

³ These ideas taken from sermon at St. Andrew's Enfield UK, 2020

How is our love invading the spaces our neighbours inhabit?

How are we transforming the lives of others? In what small way are we transforming their experience of life?

How are we irritating for change in the world? What are we prepared to give up so others might experience life in its fullness, might experience joy? Who are we standing up for, for whom are we an irritating voice for in the face of injustice? How are we irritating for the rights of the vulnerable?

We are a creative bunch! What small, invasive, irritating little acts is God calling us to now?

Your kingdom come, as it is in heaven ...

Go out sowing seeds and pearls of joy in all the situations you find yourself.

Amen.