

Parables of the Kingdom

Today's reading from Matthew is the third selection that the lectionary gives us from chapter 13, putting together two strings of short parables on the kingdom of heaven. Two weeks ago we heard the parable of the sower and the seed, and the explanation, last week the rather less known story of the wheat and weeds growing together until harvest, and its explanation. Matthew's gospel gathers teachings of Jesus together into five main blocks; these three weeks of readings form the bulk of the middle one of the five blocks of teaching, and their position thus is thought to show their importance.

At the end of the passage that Jenny read to us is a rather strange saying - about the scribe who has been trained for the kingdom that this person is like a well organised house-holder, or perhaps manager, who can produce things both old and new as wanted. Now in general the gospels do not speak well of the scribes, the students of the scriptures. One suggestion I have read is that these words are a sort of self-reference, almost a signature, by the author. He is setting out his understanding of what he himself is doing in presenting the good news of the kingdom of heaven, showing how it is founded in, and illustrated by, the Hebrew scriptures.

The same phrases, about the student of the law who is also trained, or instructed, or a disciple of the kingdom, also could be applied to Paul the apostle, who even when writing to largely non-Jewish hearers, relies on the Hebrew scriptures and culture to explain and show the significance of Jesus Christ.

To go back to the kingdom parables; the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed which grows into a bush. The seed of the mustard plant is proverbially the smallest of seeds - and seeds are inherently small - even those of us who don't garden now may remember the childhood fun of trying to spread a handful of tiny seeds evenly along a line in the ground. The seed is both like, and unlike, the plant it will grow into, carrying the future pattern of growth hidden in the dry speck. And the mustard plant is larger than most herbs - but a tree that birds can perch on? But here the scribe comes in - there is a passage in the book of Ezekiel about a sprig planted by the Lord which grows into a noble cedar tree, such that every kind of bird may come and nest in its branches. The birds are a picture of all nations.

So in this brief parable we have images of the kingdom as something tiny like a seed, planted by the Lord, as is the seed in the parables of the sower and of the wheat and weeds - growing and sprouting while hidden, forming something huge beyond all natural scale, hospitable to the whole world.

Now the culture of the first century had no difficulty with the idea of girl-jobs and boy-jobs, and the story of planting a field is matched by one of a woman putting yeast into flour. Once again the scale is exceptional – the three measures of flour are in other translations interpreted as half-a hundred weight, or enough for fifty large loaves. And when Abraham and Sarah entertain the mysterious three visitors by the oaks of Mamre before the destruction of Sodom, Sarah takes three measures of choice meal to make bread for the visitors. I have never made bread, but I have used yeast to raise a sponge pudding, and the way even that small mixture expands, apparently of itself, as the yeast gets to work is impressive. Again, there is an image of something small and undistinguished, but immensely powerful, and whose workings are hidden.

Then there is the story of the hidden treasure. No metal detectors then, but Palestine had been insecure so often that finding valuables hidden by an earlier generation fleeing or fearing attack and robbery was entirely possible. Even in our own time, the chance discovery of the treasure of the scrolls found in a cave near the Dead Sea reminds of this. Whether the finder of the treasure is entirely virtuous in not disclosing his find until he had bought the field, and with it ownership of all that was within it, is not clear. But the selling of all that he had to buy the field may hint at the sacrifices that may be needed to grasp the kingdom.

Pearls were traditionally images of piety, of study of the Torah law. The merchant selling all that he has to buy the flawless pearl – that is not a commercial transaction, that is commitment, passion. Both these parables of selling all to obtain the valued thing –and with great joy – hint at the overwhelming importance of grasping the kingdom, the long-looked for kingdom, when it is available.

The final parable is different; with its images of a net collecting all fish, later to be sorted for use or rejection, links rather to the story of wheat and weeds. Again the sense that this kingdom is ultimately important, that it really matters.

The reading from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome is the last part of a wonderful essay on how we have assurance of the love of God. Just before our reading today, he has described the work of the Spirit. He has pictured the world groaning as though in childbirth while waiting for its new creation, and the church sharing in this groaning in the tension between the present and the eventual redemption of bodies. Our passage continues this theme of inarticulate groaning, though now translated as sighs to deep for words. When we don't know how to pray, when we are overwhelmed with the problems of the world – climate change and rising waters, war and violence, refugees famine, injustice, changing morality and structures of society – then the spirit takes us and prays through our lack of words, and the Father hears. There is a wonderful image of God as the Searcher of hearts – where the word for search has a meaning of someone searching in the dark, with a torch, or by listening. Later in the passage there is also an image of the Ascended Christ praying for us and all his people.

Paul considers the mystery of how people are called by God into relationship with God - into the kingdom in Matthew's term – it is God's initiative, not something we do ourselves, as mysterious as the growth of a seed – and those who are called are also made part of the family of God, and just as surely will be made partakers in the glory of God. And this glorification is still in the future, but is so certain that Paul speaks of it in the past tense, as if it has already happened. Finally Paul, battered, criticised, persecuted, weary Paul, heartbroken that his own people have largely not accepted the gospel message, and aware that only tiny numbers of outsiders have heard his message, Paul gives a fourfold set of rhetorical questions

Who is against us?
Who will bring any charge against us?
Who is to condemn us?
Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

Nothing, not age or illness, not poverty or small numbers, not sorrow or ill will, not the power of evil, or anything else, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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