

Living in the Mysteries of the Kingdom during Pandemic

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 (ESV)

The Mustard Seed and the Leaven

³¹ He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. ³² It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

³³ He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure

⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, ⁴⁶ who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

The Parable of the Net

⁴⁷ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. ⁴⁸ When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

New and Old Treasures

⁵¹ “Have you understood all these things?” They said to him, “Yes.” ⁵² And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

Intro

Jesus is widely admired as a great teacher.

We have just heard a flow of his skill and depth in a series of pictures in aid of describing the Kingdom of God.

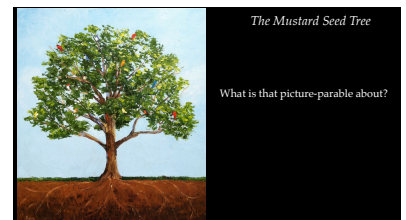
The beauty and power of this as teaching I see here is that Jesus links what was very familiar to his audience with the unfamiliar. He makes the connection in a way that will stay imprinted in the visual memory.

Before I review these pithy parables I suggest they all describe the dynamic or power of those places where God reigns and the hiddenness of that power.

The Mustard Seed Tree.

The power of the small seed is seen in the way it can grow to become a habitation for birds. In my experience takes about 5 years and is a delight to see.

The ‘birds of the air’ may be a reference to the Gentiles or people from elsewhere. For some years my contact card featured this image with the strap line, ‘Trinity Church – a great place to land’. In my mind the presence of God’s Kingdom among us made it possible for people to land and find home here.



That is a mysterious but recognisable dynamic of God’s Kingdom where it takes hold in and among people. I believe we are part of that as Trinity Church.

The Woman Making Dough

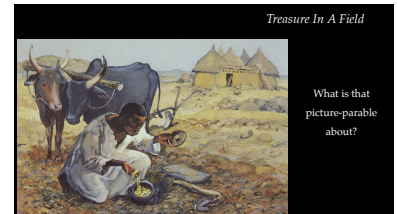
Bread making goes back along way and the power of yeast was known in every household. We even hear that in the Germanic based English word ‘Lady’ which comes from something like *hlæfdige* which is about laying or kneading dough or, ‘*deeg*’ in Dutch. In this image Jesus says to women that what they do illustrates the mysterious power of God’s Kingdom in the larger mass.

Kneading dough is hard work but with a small measure of yeast something wondrous comes about. That is an image of the Kingdom at work in the world.



The Hidden Treasure.

There are constantly stories emerging on my BBC news app of farmers and people with metal detectors finding buried treasure troves in Europe. Vast collections of coins from the Roman period are being found buried in pots. This is nothing new and ongoing.



Throughout history people have buried treasure for various reasons then never came back for it.

That gave rise to the odd treasure find which was a known possibility. The legal convention then was that treasure found belonged to the owner of the field. Today governments have laws requiring such discoveries to be handed over for the archeological value. In Jesus’ world it was the property of the land owner. So the smart thing to do if you found buried treasure was buy to the field without telling the owner about the treasure. That’s why the man in this parable covers up the treasure before selling all he has to buy the field.

That is the appropriate response to finding God’s Kingdom somewhere. It’s worth everything so get it at all costs.

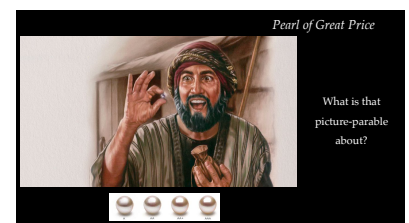
Q: Now imagine what people looking on might think?

A: Why is this person suddenly raising money everywhere to buy that field? Is he suffering sunstroke or perhaps on to something? Let’s watch.

So there is a note of mystery to this experience of discovering God as King in your life. It’s an unexpected find that becomes everything and changes the future.

The Pearl of Great Price.

The pearl merchant story overlaps with the treasure in the field. The trained eye of the pearl merchant knows the true value of the perfect pearl and is very excited to see one. It’s worth every other pearl put together. That is a mysterious power over an otherwise level-headed merchant. The comparable experience I have seen in Trinity Church at times is the clear indication that two people have fallen in love. They are smitten and only have eyes for each other, as if no one else exists just like the perfect pearl for the pearl merchant.



The Fisherman's Net.

Much of Jesus' ministry took place round a large, well-stocked lake. Fishing was a big local business involving nets.

The Kingdom of God is likened to a net that captures many, most, if not everyone. That is a mysterious thing. It's as if God does not exercise quality control until the very end.



Then comes a note we hear more in Matthew's Gospel than anywhere else. It's the note of harsh judgement as we already heard in the parable of the wheat and the tares last week from earlier in this chapter.



So the net full of fish is taken in and the catch is sorted. Not everyone caught up in the Kingdom is destined for the Kingdom. They are considered stowaways or freeloading imposters. Jesus speaks clearly of a place of fiery torment for those judged as unfit for the Kingdom, even despite having some history of swimming in it and being caught in the net and keeping good saintly company. Might church be a bit like the net?

I am reminded of an equally disturbing parable of the king's wedding feast in Matthew chapter 22 where a guest was not appropriately dressed and refused to speak when questioned.¹ This also resulted in someone who seemed to be part of the King's feast being cast out into the darkness again - for 'weeping and gnashing of teeth'.

There will be surprises in the Kingdom, don't assume it runs without deep deceptions being exposed but the mystery is that God acts when he chooses and not before. The net is generous in its welcome but God will not be mocked.

Main Message

This brief review of a string of parables brings us to the meat of today's message.

After relating these parables, Jesus the great teacher says:

⁵¹ "Have you understood all these things?" They said to him, "Yes." ⁵² And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Q: Did you get the message of all this? Can you join the dots?

Q: Are you sure?

A: OK, so please understand:



To relate to the mystery of the precious Kingdom of God you will need to pull everything out of the cupboard. It will require the full resources of both past and present carefully selected from all that's available.

¹ Matthew 22:¹¹ "But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. ¹² And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. ¹³ Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen."

And now it's as if Jesus paints himself as a scribe -a man used to painstakingly handling the sacred scriptures- to say that to appreciate God as King there are ancient treasures that apply and there are new revelations and new insights, such as Jesus's own parables that can be accessed to describe the mystery of God's Kingdom within and among people who seek it.

In some parts of the world a culture war rages between so-called 'Conservatives' and 'Progressives'. Those who want to retain what they value are often fighting with those who want to innovate, develop and leave the past behind. It can get very heated in both politics and religion.

Jesus embraces both conserving the wisdom and revelation of the past found in scripture and, applying the fresh revelations of recent time and even right now!

Life in the Kingdom of God requires more than what either conservatives or progressives can individually offer.

every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

That requires a breadth that not all Christians are open to. It may encompass Word and Spirit?
In Trinity Church I have tried to do this allowing past and present to inform our worship.

Conclusion:

I referred a lot to mystery today, the mystery of God's Kingdom, present and yet hidden - real and yet not so concrete as to possess.

Meanwhile we are in a season of mystery and seeing the Kingdom of God is possibly getting a bigger challenge as it the pandemic situation continues. Where is the Reign of God for you now after now 19 weeks of church on line with so many features of life and church fading as memories? Where is God's hand when your life is being shaken around by circumstances?

Can you recognise God as present and at work as King in this season in your lives?
Have you had an opportunity to trust God through the disturbed circumstances and see his salvation?

How might you describe your walk with God in all this using an existing scripture or creating a new metaphor?

The parables I relate to at present are the 3 stories of lostness from Luke 15: The lost Sheep, Lost Coin and Lost Son. I see myself as being in that place where I miss something but I know it's there. It's just out of my sight but it's still there like the sun behind thick cloud. That's where I find myself praying from.

I am only sharing this as my experience and not suggesting you identify with me but I am encouraging you to consider what place you are in as a seeker of God's Kingdom in pandemic lockdown?

God is always speaking, God's Kingdom never ends but I suggest the mystery has deepened in this season which may last and linger for some time.

The mystery of the Kingdom requires more attention in the mystery of this season. Keep looking!

Wake up and strengthen yourself in what you can still recognise.