

We are continuing to look at some parables of the Kingdom, in Matthew's gospel.

So what's a kingdom?

I looked up kingdom on the internet, as you do, and it wasn't very helpful! I found that *Kingdom* was a [British television](#) series. It stars [Stephen Fry](#) as Peter Kingdom, a [Norfolk solicitor](#) who is coping with family, colleagues, and the strange locals who come to him for legal assistance.

Not much help to me there!

I asked one of our granddaughters what a kingdom is, and she said 'it's where a King or a queen is in charge'. Much more helpful.

Anyway, on balance, it seemed good to stick to the Bible and related books, to get some sort of understanding of what Jesus might be wanting to say to us through these particular parables of the kingdom from Matthew 13.

1 Crown. A Kingdom has a king, and in the Kingdom of heaven, the King is Jesus. His kingdom is wherever he rules, wherever he is honoured as King.

So how does that work? And why isn't his Kingdom more obvious?

When Jesus came to earth the first time, in human form, he said, the kingdom of heaven has already come upon you. So in one sense, the Kingdom arrived with him. He brought it with him, in his person.

And He will come again, in glory to bring in his kingdom fully. Heaven will come to earth, and everything will be renewed, restored, transformed to be as he wants it to be. Then it will no longer be hidden.

So the Kingdom of heaven is a kind of now and not yet. It's here, wherever Jesus is honoured as King, but His Kingdom is certainly not fully here yet, as we can see when we look at Israel /Palestine, Ukraine, Syria...

But God's Kingdom *will* come. In Isaiah 65:17 God promises a new heaven and a new earth, and in Rev 21 we read about John's vision of the renewed heaven and renewed earth, where there is no more death, no more crying, no more pain. His kingdom **will** come. Only God knows when, but it could be in our lifetime! Meanwhile, we have in Matthew's gospel a number of clues about what it is like.

There are two pairs of parables:

Mustard seed and yeast, treasure in a field and a pearl, then another one about nets and the final coming of the Kingdom.

Seed and tree.

The Kingdom of heaven is like a situation where a man takes a mustard seed. It is the smallest of seeds, but it grows into a big bush, big enough for birds to nest in.

A tiny seed that in itself is insignificant, despised perhaps.

What would Jesus' hearers make of that?

Just before this chapter, Jesus had had a bit of a ding dong with the Pharisees, and they determined to kill him.

This parable, about the mustard seed, and the next one about yeast were for everyone to hear, including those Jewish leaders, who were always hovering around, listening, trying to catch Jesus out, to pin something on him. Jesus was giving a kind of veiled message which said my little flock does not look very strong at the moment, but just you wait - it will grow and it will amaze you!

And at the same time he was giving encouragement to his followers, saying that there might not be many of you at the moment, but watch out, you will increase!

Matthew was writing to the early church, which was tiny compared with the huge Roman empire. The early Christians had no power. It was the Jewish leaders who had the power, and over them, the Roman authorities. The early church felt small and insignificant. So these parables about the tiny seed and the little spoonful of yeast would be a huge encouragement to them.

And it happened! From 11 fairly weak and confused disciples, the church has grown and grown for over 2,000 years. And it has transformed society.

Think of William Wilberforce, think of Nelson Mandela, think of Mother Theresa, think of Pope Francis.

But equally significant, I think, are the less visible people, quietly getting on with loving their neighbours and their neighbourhoods, because they know that God loves their neighbours and their neighbourhoods so much that Jesus died for them.

Peter was a vicar. He retired and moved to a new town. When he arrived there, he asked God what he wanted him to do. And it seemed to Peter that God was saying I want you to bless this town. I want you to pick up litter. Now that wasn't quite what Peter was expecting, but he went to

the council and they gave him a litter –picking claw on permanent loan. On his daily 2 mile walk to the country park, he picked up rubbish and put it in a black bag. He smiled a 'hello' at people he met, and gradually they responded with a smile. Some chatted to him. One man asked, 'Do they pay you for this?' 'O I do it voluntarily', he said. 'You'll go to heaven for that!' the man replied. 'Well, said Peter, I'll not get to heaven for picking litter, but I will because I know Jesus, who died for me and makes the way open for me.' The man went away thoughtful! During Easter week, Peter gave out little wooden crosses, made, he told them, from olive wood where Jesus lived, and where he died on the first Easter. Peter was sowing seed, and who knows what the outcome will be?

Little acts of kindness can have a ripple effect, for God and his kingdom

In this country today, we hear about church numbers declining, but it has been said that if all Christian people withdrew from voluntary organisations, society would collapse.

Yeast and loaf

The parable of the yeast is saying something similar, but adds a bit more. You can't see the yeast in the bread, it's hidden, but it is a transforming influence. 40 litres of flour - can you imagine? Must have been preparing for a party, I think! Jesus is saying, you will be amazed at what my little flock will achieve, gradually, as they transform communities.

In New York in early 1990s, crime was down, confidence up, but HIV aids epidemic was in full flow. Neil was in his first job, in the Human Resources department of a property development company. One day, his boss asked him to redraft the the terms of medical cover for the firm's employees. Specifically, he asked him to withdraw cover for HIV/AIDS medication for the staff, because of rocketing costs. This didn't feel right to Neil, but what could he do? It was his first job, he respected his boss, who was also a leader at Neil's church. So Neil wrote a memo along these lines, 'I will do whatever you tell me to, but I am concerned about the decision to withhold care from the employees for HIV/Aids related sickness. Andy in our team drives an ambulance voluntarily in his spare time and is around needles a lot of the time so what if he contracts HIV? I will not do anything unless I receive further instructions from you'. What a diplomatic memo that was! No accusations of bigotry, no appeal to human rights legislation, no self righteous anger. Neil did not receive any further instructions about this from his boss. And though they did not know what had gone on in the background, and how nearly they had not been covered for medical insurance, the lives of HIV/Aids sufferers in that company were transformed.

Invisible action, transforming a situation.

You may or may not know that some of our members walk round this estate, praying silently for the people who live here. Who knows what the outcome will be from that hidden activity?

The next 2 parables are about the absolute joy of finding something valuable beyond measure. We read in v 36 that Jesus had left the crowd and gone indoors. So now, his teaching is not for the crowds, but for his disciples only - and that includes us.

Man digging, treasure, sold sign.

The man who was ploughing his field accidentally lit upon some treasure. It was quite common in those days to bury your treasure so you could retrieve it later, perhaps after a war, or when you came back home from being away. I hesitate to say this as there are at least 4 retired bankers in this congregation, but after the banking crisis of 2008 we may have wondered whether burying our treasure in a field might have been a better option for some of us!

Now clearly this man did not own the field, he must have been a tenant farmer, or a farm worker, because he buried the treasure and went off to sell all he owned so he could buy that field, and so that then the treasure would be his.

We might want to question the morality or the legality of what he did, but that's not the point Jesus is making here - he is making the point that the kingdom of heaven is worth more than anything else in the world.

It's worth giving up everything, to belong to Jesus' Kingdom.

That was a poor man who sold everything he had for something more valuable to him.

Pearls

The next man spent his life looking for pearls, and he was a rich man. But when he found a pearl that was even finer than any he had ever seen before, he did the same as the poor man - he sold everything he had so he could buy that special pearl.

What was Jesus telling his disciples? What is he telling us?

That the most valuable thing in the world is to belong to his kingdom.

Some people come across Jesus it seems almost by chance, just like the man who lit upon treasure in the field.

Penelope was in a mess. She had started dabbling in drugs, and she could see from some of the people she started hanging out with that it was a slippery slope. And she didn't want to go that

way. One Sunday evening she was walking disconsolately down the street, and she heard singing. It came from a church. She peeped in at the open door. Someone spotted her and invited her in, so she went in and sat right at the back. What she heard there transformed her life. They talked about Jesus, they talked about belonging, they talked about hope, they talked about a fresh start. And that night she gave her life to Jesus. This was unlooked for, unexpected, and it was real - like the treasure in the field.

Other people search and search until they find God. David Suchet, probably better known as the little Belgian detective Poirot, was doubtful about God. In a hotel bedroom he came across a bible, and he read Paul's letter to the Romans. Quite a challenge, but he's an intelligent man! And by the end of it, he was convinced. He searched, and he found.

In these two parables, the treasure accidentally found, and the pearl which was sought, Jesus is saying that nothing is more important in life than being part of the Kingdom of heaven, here and now, and for ever.

Fishermen.

Then there's the parable of the net.

Men go fishing, and some of what they catch is good, and they keep it, and some of it for various reasons is not worth keeping so it's thrown away.

What is Jesus saying? It's something that is hard for us to hear.

He is saying in terms of his kingdom that some people will choose to belong, and some will not.

In other places he talks about the importance of believing in him, having our sins forgiven, receiving new life in the power of the spirit. He is the way in to the kingdom.

And he says that at the end of the age, it's his angels who will go and gather up the ones who are in the kingdom. So it's not our decision who is in, and who is not - our individual responsibility is simply to trust Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins, live for him, love him and show his love to other people by the power of his Spirit.

Finally, he asks the disciples if they get it. And they say they do.

Then there is a saying which is a bit difficult to understand - a disciple is like the owner of a house who takes old and new things out of his storeroom.

Whatever does that mean? I don't know, and neither do most of the commentators I have

read!

Handbag and pearl.

But I think we could take it to mean that the old things are the message about the Kingdom, the gospel, the good news, which is always the same. And the new things could be new ways of packaging the good news to make it relevant for people of any era. For instance, listening to a 20 minute sermon is not the way most people of the 21st century tend to discover truth, though it's possible! Singing hymns is not what comes naturally to anyone except those of us who have been brought up in the church! The way we do church at 10.0 in here is not likely to attract many people who are looking for meaning and purpose and a future, even though it is what we are used to.

The truth of the good news is the same as ever it was, but I suggest that we keep on using new ways of sharing the good news in our community. For each new generation, the gospel needs to be communicated in new ways.

So the Kingdom starts small, and invisible, but it grows, and is transformative.

It can be stumbled across accidentally or can be found after a long search, but either way, it is received with great joy because it is so precious.

Crown

In the end, when Jesus the King returns to this earth in his power and glory, those who are in his kingdom will find joy in being with him for ever.

So these parables offer us challenge and encouragement. Do we know the King? He is the entry point to the Kingdom. Do we do our bit to work for his Kingdom, wherever we are? And have we the certainty that He will come again, the earth will be renewed, and we will be part of all of that?

That is the challenge and the encouragement to us today.

Amen