

Sermon Eighth Sunday after Pentecost Year A; July 26, 2020

Matthew 13: 31-33,44-52

'The kingdom of heaven'

Pastor Fraser Pearce

When you were baptised one of the gifts you received
Was the gift of the Lord's Prayer.
Just as the Lord Jesus handed on his prayer to his disciples
In his ministry with them
So he has handed his prayer on to you through the church
And he has taught you to pray

Our Father in heaven... your kingdom come

Of course, God's kingdom comes even without our asking
But our Lord Jesus teaches us to ask the Father
That his kingdom may come *also to us*
That his just and gentle rule may be seen *among us*

Now in today's Gospel reading our Lord gives us parables
And hands on teaching to us
About God's kingdom: about what it is like
And about how it works in our world.
As we receive his word
We will come to a deeper understanding about *who Jesus is*
And *who we are*.
We will come to a deeper understanding that Jesus
Is the one who gave up everything
So that we might be his own treasured possession.
And we will come into the freedom, of living in the reality
That nothing is as important as having Jesus as our Lord
And living in the kingdom that he brings.

As we prepare to listen again to Jesus' word
It's helpful to keep in mind the context of his teaching
Because as Christian people we don't simply receive sage advice from Jesus;
Rather, we hear his story
And how think through how we fit into it

In Chapter 12 we hear that Jesus has been receiving

Hesitation, opposition, and rejection in relation to his ministry.
And at the end of Chapter 13 we hear that Jesus
Experiences rejection from his home town.

In these bookends of opposition and rejection
Jesus gives his parables and his teaching *about God's kingdom*

Note: 'his parables *and* his teaching'
Jesus taught the crowds *only in parables*
So that they *wouldn't* understand.
But he taught his disciples, his apprentices, privately
Explaining to them the meaning of the parables
And *revealing* to them the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.

We can only understand Jesus' parables
If we are called as disciples, as apprentices
If we come to know *who Jesus is*
And not just what he says.

And indeed *we listen as baptised people*
As people who *have been called into discipleship*
And who receive Jesus words in faith that *he is our saviour*
And that his word reveals to us *who he is*

So Let's listen: **[Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'**

[Jesus] told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

Jesus told these two parables to the crowds, without explaining them
What can we, as disciples, say about them as we receive them?

Note first of all that these parables aren't telling us to do anything
Rather, they are *descriptions* of what God's kingdom is like
What these two parables have in common
Is likening the kingdom of God to something that is small, or hidden

And yet something that has great power in its smallness, in its hiddenness
To transform reality

The mustard seed is tiny and seemingly insignificant

But when it is planted and takes root *it grows*

- Scholars note, by the way,

That the *birds of the air* is an allusion to Daniel 4 and Ezekiel 17

And that the reference is to the nations, to those outside of God's chosen

Coming into the kingdom that God establishes-

Likewise, yeast seems insignificant

It cannot be seen while it is at work

It blends into the dough; but as we wait the yeast shows its *hidden power*

Leavening the dough ready for baking

Giving food to the hungry, and nourishment for those in need

Jesus himself was not outstanding in the world's eyes

And there is something small and humble in his word

A word that is in general not handed on by the rich or the powerful

On the world stage

But a word that is handed on in a hidden way

By the small and seemingly insignificant:

As a mother teaches her small child to pray in the low light of bed time

As a friend gives encouragement to a mate struggling with depression

As a worker serves cheerfully and faithfully mopping the floor of a bathroom

Knowing that God sees, that God rewards.

These are simple, small, hidden activities that have their origin in Jesus

And the life of faith that flows from him

And that yet transform the world as people

from all tribes, nations, and languages

Come to faith, and have their lives transformed by the love of God

So have confidence in Jesus and his word:

Don't be put off by its smallness, by its lack of glamour.

Don't become despondent because your actions of faith

Are hidden from the sight of the wealthy and the powerful.

As you hand on Jesus' word in what you say and do

The transforming power of his word will do its work

After Jesus gives these parables to the crowds
He then goes on to give further parables and teaching to his chosen disciples
Parables and teaching again about the kingdom of heaven

'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

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

Again, note that these parables are not telling us to do anything
They are *descriptions* of what God's kingdom is like

Today I'll pick up on the second of these parables
The parable of the Pearl of Great Value
I'll use an analogy that I've used once before
But that I feel constrained to use again
Because my wife's name is Margaret, and her name means *Pearl*
In fact her name comes from the word in Greek used in this parable: *margarites*
We just celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary last week
And she is indeed a Pearl of Great Value to me!

I can tell you that when I met Margaret
And when it became apparent that she'd be willing to marry me
I was most willing to let go of any bachelor freedoms
To be joined with her in marriage.
I didn't dawdle to the altar on my wedding day.
And although, of course, our marriage has not been easy
Because I have had a lot of maturing in love to do
Nevertheless the cost has been worth the benefit

On the one hand, this is what it's like with the kingdom of God
When we find it, we realise that all the things we may have been seeking first:
Property and possessions, human approval
Our need to be in the right
We realise that all of these things are not worth keeping
Compared to the benefit of life with God in the kingdom he creates.
Even though the path of discipleship is hard

And we can feel like giving up as we go through the hard business
Of maturing in Christian love
There is real and lasting joy in the kingdom of God
That no earthly distress or sorrow can destroy
There is the love of God for us in Christ Jesus
That not even death can separate us from

And this brings us to the heart of the parable as disciples of Christ
Because although we can read the parable as describing
The value of God's kingdom for us
The parable also, even primarily, reveals to us *our value to God*

We know that God treasures, that God values his people
In the Old Testament we read passages like this one from Exodus:
'Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.' Exodus 19:5,6a

So from Old Testament testimony alone we could receive Jesus' parable
As teaching us about God's willingness to sacrifice for our sake
To gain us as a treasured possession

But Jesus speaks to us not only as a prophet or as a law giver
He speaks to us as Lord
As the one who showed us what real Lordship means
By taking on our human flesh
By humbling himself and becoming obedient
Even to his death on a cross
There, with Christ crucified, we see the depth, the height
The death conquering *power* of God's love for us

It's this message of God's love for us in Christ
That has the power to free us from being enslaved
To things like money and possessions
Or human approval, or the maddening drive to be in the right
It's this message that transforms our lives as individuals
And as a community as we learn to confess our faults
To be reconciled to one another
And to live in humility as brothers and sisters

Bound together in our common bond of Spirit-filled forgiveness
It's this message that transforms our world
As people from all tribes ,nations, and tongues find unity
In the peace that comes from being found by God
And made his treasured possession in Christ Jesus

At the very end on the Scriptures, in Revelation 22:20

We read these words: ***Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!***

It is in Jesus coming to us that we have hope

So Come, Lord Jesus

Be the guest in our homes as we eat and drink together

Be the one who finds us and makes his own

Enter into our hearts, and live with us forever.

For you are our Lord and Saviour.

Amen.