

Clues to the Kingdom of God

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 30 July 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Mrs Dawn Robson

Pentecost 8A

Genesis 29: 15-28; Romans 8: 26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

How lucky am I! Today I have 3 great readings to work with: The story of Jacob and Rachel, Jesus' parables of the kingdom of heaven, and that wonderful passage in Paul's letter to the Romans.

Let's start with the gospel reading:

The parables of the kingdom occur in 3 of the gospels. Mark and Luke say "*the kingdom of God*"; Matthew says "*The kingdom of heaven*". They are the same thing.

After Jesus has told his followers about the Kingdom of heaven, using similes or parables they would be familiar with, he asks "*Have you understood all this?*" Surprisingly they answer "*Yes*".

I have had to read, and re-read them, and consult some commentaries, to tease out the meaning of some of the puzzles. But they just caught it, so it seems!

The first question I want to ask is "*what exactly is the Kingdom of Heaven?*"

Maybe Jesus is thinking about the community he hopes his disciples might form after his death to carry on his ministry. If so, can we equate the church with the kingdom? The church might like to think of itself as the small seed that grows to become a great tree, the yeast that will finally pervade the whole lump, the priceless pearl or the field that contains treasure. But, these parables are about the kingdom, not the church. The kingdom is wider than the church, and is not limited to people with certain beliefs. These parables challenge the church to respond to their message.

So rather than try and solve the puzzle of what exactly is the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven, I will just walk you through some of the clues.

The first two (the mustard seed and the yeast) are to do with small things that swell and take over the world. The next two (the treasure and the pearl) are beautiful and incredibly valuable things that you come across by accident and can't live without. The last one, the sorting out of the good and bad fish in the net, is about the final judgment.

Let's start with the mustard seed. It is a small seed but grows into a tree which would be familiar to the readers of Matthew's gospel. The tree itself is ordinary, not noted for its shape, beauty or its height, but the birds of the air enjoy sitting on the branches and building their nests.

The Kingdom of God starts with small beginnings, the people who form it are ordinary; they don't have to be the most impressive or the most beautiful. Like the mustard seed, the followers of Jesus are a bunch of ragged folk, full of doubts, full of fears, unable to comprehend a lot of what Jesus says or does. Yet, the reign of God bursting into history rests on these kinds of folk. Like the mustard tree, they are to offer shelter, rest, and hospitality to all. Some commentators liken the mustard tree to a weed. If, like me, you are a gardener you will know that weeds are persistent, they just keep on spreading, and breaking through the soil in the most unexpected and unwelcome places. They are almost impossible to eradicate.

Next, the Kingdom of God is like yeast which a woman took and hid in 3 measures of flour until it was all leavened. The kingdom, like the yeast, is hidden and silent, but its growth will be revealed in the future. The quantity of flour she uses is surprising: 3 measures make enough bread to feed more than 100 people. This points to the surprising, miraculous extravagance of the coming kingdom

Jane Williams in her book *Lectionary reflections* gives another perspective: *"The surprise in these parables is not what the yeast and the mustard seed do, since we know about that already. The point is that other things that we may not be so familiar with, may also behave like this. Don't discount small things until you know what they are capable of. Don't think about big things as though they can never have had small beginnings."*

The next two parables are to do with finding the treasure in the field and the pearl, and what the finders do with it. Both the farmer and the merchant sell everything for the sake of one thing. They seem to be well-off already – they have things they can sell in order to gain possession of the treasure. The farmer stumbles upon the treasure by accident, whereas the merchant is actively seeking, he knows what he is looking for, and still finds something beyond all his expectations. Some people discover the kingdom after years of searching; others find it almost by accident.

The fifth parable is the net, thrown into the sea, gathering fish of every kind. The fish are sorted, the good being kept and the bad being thrown out. Matthew is concerned with judgment which separates humanity into those who respond to Jesus, or fail to do so. This theme occurs in other parts of his gospel. Those disciples who respond to the word of Jesus become the new community, the family of God.

Then, what can we learn about the Kingdom of God from all these examples?

It starts small and grows, in ordinary places.

You sometimes have to wait for its growth.

It is a treasure worth attaining.

What holds together the parables of sudden growth and the parables of treasure is found in verse 52: *"Jesus says: Therefore every religious scholar who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."* Matthew is referring to the importance of recording the ministry of Jesus. As he does frequently, he sees the life of Jesus as being the fulfilment of the Hebrew scripture prophecies. He refers to what is old and what is new to show that the religious scholar treasures his Jewish past and alongside it introduces the new, presenting the old in a new light, seeing all things in the light of the Christ event and the coming of the kingdom.

This religious scholar is the disciples, and he/she is us. The religious scholar is the one who has to use these stories to plant small ideas that will feed the world; the scholar is the one who has to show that the treasure is so beautiful it is worth selling all that we have to possess it.

Now let's move to the Jacob reading

The Old Testament is full of quirky little stories which have surprising endings. Today's is one such story.

It focusses on Jacob who has delighted in trickery and living by his wits. You will remember how, with his mother's help, he tricked his blind father Isaac into giving him the blessing that should have gone to his older brother Esau.

In order to escape the wrath of Esau and the consequences of his deceptions, Jacob fled to his Uncle Laban's farm.

But as he settled into his new life, he discovered that his mother's brother also had a fondness for dirty tricks which rivalled his own. And it was going to go on like this for a couple of decades, too, as both Jacob and Laban schemed to get the better of each other.

We read today that Jacob loved Rachel; he wanted her more than anything. He was prepared to work for 7 years for his Uncle Laban in order to claim her as his wife. Instead Laban tricked him into marrying her sister Leah, but Jacob didn't give up. He was prepared to work another 7 years in order to marry his beloved Rachel. She was like the pearl without price, or the treasure in the field.

Jacob, his 12 sons and their descendants understood themselves to have exclusive knowledge and privileges in their relationship with God. Their understanding of the Kingdom of God became restricted and confined to themselves, although this is contrary to what God wanted when he said to Abraham: "*You will be the father of a multitude of nations*". This vision or dream of God for humankind was compromised by focussing on rules and ways of life that excluded others.

God, in Jesus, entered history to renew God's vision for humankind. Jesus taught that the Kingdom is universal and is for all humankind not just the Hebrew people. This is what lies behind his encouragement and commissioning of his followers to go out and speak about and live out this wider idea of the universal nature of the Kingdom of God.

The apostle Paul understands Jesus new vision of the expansiveness and universality of the Kingdom. In his letter to the Galatians he says "*there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.*"

Paul wrote in his letter to the faith community in Rome the words we read today: "*For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

Paul could have been thinking of the parable of the beautiful pearl, and the hidden treasure when he wrote these words. He tells his readers that this thing that they yearn for so deeply is the knowledge that they are loved completely and forever by God. Despite the difficulties and persecution that the early disciples were facing they are reassured by Paul that nothing can separate them from God's love.

So, how can we sum up all of this? I suggest that a possible definition of the Kingdom of God is that it is whenever and wherever people live out the dream of God. This dream that was revealed to Abraham and his descendants, the Hebrew people, and was renewed and enlarged by Jesus.

The prophet Micah said *"What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."* Jesus added to this when he said *"a new commandment I give to you, that you shall love your neighbour as yourself."*

I think the Kingdom of God may be found wherever people live in peace and harmony, with justice, and love and care for each other. This is the dream of God. The promise to those who enter the Kingdom is that God will be with them always, through all the joys and sorrows of life, and will never stop loving them.

Surely this is the gospel for us. This is the good news. The invitation is to us - and seekers in every age and place. The Kingdom of God is the greatest reality of them all, and it is our joy if, by grace, we have the eyes to see it and enter it.