

St Brandon's, Sermon for 26th July 2020.

Romans 8:26-end, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-53

Kingdom of Heaven.

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Let us pray, Lord may your word take root and grow in us that we may come to find and know your kingdom, Amen

I wonder how many of us have ever seen a mustard tree? I've often been a bit perplexed by this: does mustard really grow on trees? A quick google search reassured me that a field of mustard looks quite like a field of rape; apparently individual plants might reach 8-10 feet by the Lake of Gennesaret where Jesus was teaching but not exactly a tree! We are in the 'paint it big and paint it bright' parable pictures, where we can so easily follow the story and see the scene, and are then left wondering what it might mean for us, and playing with the images to see things differently, and introducing into our vocabulary, a word or symbol that represents so much more. In this case, what Jesus means by the kingdom of heaven.

Unless I misread the concordance, it looks as though the term 'kingdom of heaven' appears only in Matthew's gospel – there's plenty of kingdom terminology in the other gospels but not this particular phrase.

John the Baptist preaches "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*" (Matt 3.2). Jesus begins his ministry, taking up the same proclamation, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*" (Matt 4.17), and when he commissions his twelve disciples to go into the harvest, he tells them to proclaim, "*The kingdom of heaven has come near*" (Matt 10.17).

According to Matthew, it would seem this *is* the good news of Jesus' ministry but I wonder what how the disciples understood of it at that stage? What clues might they – and we – have had?

In his sermon on the mount, Jesus says "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*", and the same of those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. (Matt 5.3, 10)

So, is it something that can be possessed?

In a long series of teachings about how to be disciples and follow him, he cautions "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven.*" (Matt 7.21) and "*many will come from east and West and will eat with*

Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven”, while the heirs of the kingdom are thrown into the outer darkness.’ (Matt 8.11,12)

Is that Kingdom of Heaven a place? Somewhere they’re going to go to – or not?

He says to the crowds that *‘the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist’,* and that *‘the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force’* (Matt 11.11,12)

How could the least be greater?

Well, this series of parables that started with the parable of the sower, and the parable of the tares, which we have heard the last two Sundays, shows Jesus trying to explain the multi-dimensional meaning of this expression. He takes his disciples aside to specifically explain it further, because they are the ones who are open-eared to hear him and *‘know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.’* (Matt 13.11)

I’d like to share what I see in each of the parables individually:

Its like a mustard seed:

Back to that mustard tree: this kingdom of heaven thing is capable of exceeding all expectations: not just a waist-high brassica but a full-on tree: yet it starts with the humblest tiny, unremarkable seed – that’s maybe us, a concept, an action; a baby in a manger ... It is living, organic. It’s roots have to go deeper as the top gets bigger: like faith in action, the branches reaching up and out must be balanced, anchored and fed by a faith deeply rooted. If this represents Israel, the birds are the gentiles – us outsiders – those that will come from east and west, able to nest and make their home in the Christian faith. Things that grow like the kingdom of heaven are hospitable to the outsider; if this represents us, our church, are our branches going to be strong enough to support a bird or two?

Its like yeast:

This living, organic thing isn’t itself visible: the yeast is really only seen by its bubbling, its ability to make the dough rise, which entirely changes the nature of the dough. It is working in its own slow time through all the flour: a hidden presence. Faith in a living God, bubbling in us through the Holy Spirit, invisibly working to visibly expand and change us from inside out, becoming something quite different, through faith.

Its like treasure hidden in a field – a merchant in search of fine pearls:

Although hidden, it can be found and possessed: found in the ordinary and everyday, in a field even. But irrespective of your wealth: whether you trade in fine pearls or struggle to buy a bit of ground, the value of the kingdom of heaven

will cost you the same: all you have. Discipleship – loving and following Jesus requires the whole of you – its not a half-hearted or measured response – if you think its too expensive, perhaps you under-estimate the greatness of the treasure you have found.

Its like a net that was thrown into the sea:

Everyone's included in this net; the invitation to faith and salvation extends to everyone but ultimately there will be a time of sorting, evil will not prevail, God's love will endure: all that is made right - the righteous will be kept.

Now, let's step back and look at the whole, that is, what's already been said about the kingdom of heaven earlier in Matthew's gospel.

Jesus' ministry on earth is proclaimed by John the Baptist, Jesus and the disciples as "*The kingdom of heaven has come near*"

What or who has come near? God in the person of Jesus.

The statement: '*the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force*' sounds like Jesus, referring to the opposition he faced, and at the end of his life.

So I think the kingdom of heaven isn't a thing or place, it is fundamentally about a person: about the imminence of Jesus.

But more than just the person of Jesus, its something about the chemistry of us in relationship to Jesus: it can be possessed by the righteous, and the poor in spirit – that is, those with much space for the spirit to fill.

The kingdom of heaven is a dynamic – like yeast – its the action of Jesus working in us as sovereign.

At its simplest, I wonder if we can say that the kingdom of heaven is God in us?

What does God in us look like?

A hidden presence, bubbling and praying in us.

What is it worth? More than the greatest treasure.

What does it cost? The whole of us.

Who can afford it? Anyone who chooses.

Where do you find it? In the ordinary and immediate.

Who's offered it? All who seek.

Who's it for? Every person, that they may in turn offer branches for other people.

The kingdom of heaven is the establishing of faith in Jesus Christ as the ruling force in us. In the time of Jesus' ministry, the urgent need was for people to understand that Jesus was – is – the son of God, the fulfilment that Israel was waiting for: the new treasure, the new covenant coming through the old treasure. Both new and old.

The kingdom of heaven is a dynamic; the action of Jesus working in us spills out into action towards neighbour, towards community, into the world. It is part of the plan for all creation to be made new.

The kingdom of heaven is the place where he reigns, so when we pray 'Thy kingdom come' we are praying for his kingdom in us; in each other; in our world.

So let us pay attention to the God in us, and that Thy will be done,
Amen