

Readings: Genesis 29:15-28; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Theme: *The kingdom of God, according to Jesus.*

‘Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come’, so wrote French writer, Gustave Aimard, in a little-known book, *The French shooters*, though this statement is often attributed to another French writer, Victor Hugo.

Well, no idea has been more powerful than Jesus’ understanding of God as someone who is like a Middle Eastern father, yet more merciful than desiring judgment, as it was typical of Middle Eastern Patriarchs. That understanding leads directly to the idea of a kingdom that welcomes all for we are all children of God, the Father. That understanding emerged more than 2 thousand years ago, but it traces its origin to the story of Abraham and his family, whom God had chosen to carry the story of salvation.

We can identify many other important ideas in the history of humanity, but none has had the transforming power for good the way Jesus’ understanding of God and God’s kingdom had had. I believe the world is a much better place now than it might have been due to the Christian principles love and forgiveness. It has not always been perfect sailing as the animal instinct in us often dominates our conduct. But I firmly believe that the world is in a far better place than it might have been.

Jesus’ understanding of God and of God’s kingdom is like an eternal song; it moves at different speed; it rises to a crescendo and then drops off to an almost inaudible sound; but it never goes away...it never goes away, for, though ‘heaven and earth will pass away, [the Word of God] will [endure forever]’ (Mt. 24:35; Mk. 13:31; Lk. 21:33).

That is the story that Matthew is trying to unpack in the readings that we have been going through since the beginning of July. It continues today and into the next few Sundays.

According to late Middle Eastern scholar, Kenneth Bailey, the Middle Eastern people had modelled God after a typical Middle Eastern patriarch who was aloof, uncompromising and scary. For Bailey, the God that Jesus had experienced was like the father in the story that we have called, the parable of the prodigal son. That father, according to Bailey, was the complete opposite of a typical Middle Eastern patriarch, and that image of God was shocking to Jesus’ listeners. But this was Jesus. He was offering a view of God’s kingdom that was different from what the people had come to accept as conventional wisdom.

Counter culture ideas were not new. We encounter them in the story of Jacob, part of which is found in the passage we read from Genesis. Jacob had upset tradition by wresting the blessing away from his brother Esau who was born, just, ahead of him. In today’s passage, he has settled down at his uncle Laban’s house. It seems like he is not aware of the tradition in Aram that the older sister has to marry first, but Laban is keeping that knowledge away from Jacob. So Jacob strikes a deal with Laban that he would serve Laban for seven years for the hand of Rachel in marriage. But on the night of the wedding, Jacob got Leah instead; he was not able to violate Aramaic tradition.

It seems like ideas about God and about God’s kingdom were always in a flux. This is evident from Abraham and his family to the time of Jesus. Jesus has now arrived and he is describing the kingdom of God in terms that were considered scandalous, as the readings we have been going through this month have shown.

Today's gospel reading is not about parables; what we have are similes; there are five of them, and Jesus is using them to illustrate five different images of God's kingdom. For insights into today's reading, we need to go back to the readings of the last three Sundays. There, we will be able to see the story of Jesus' understanding of God and his ministry as it takes shape.

Jesus has arrived on the scene and finds the religious leaders are lost and, as a result, so are the people. John had come and lived like a Methodist, and they said he was possessed. Then he came and he lived like a Presbyterian, and they said he was an 'Aussie'. They felt righteous, because they had kept the law. So they criticised and judged those who were not like them as, unworthy. Jesus, though, knows this behaviour could destroy them physically. So he offers them an advice: 'be like me; I am gentle and humble in heart'.

That advice informs the parables that we read in the last two weeks, the parable of the sower and the story of the wheat and the weed. Both parables are about God, but the interpretations in the texts have taken the focus away from God.

In the parable of the sower, the interpretation focuses on the soils, though it is called, the parable of the sower. So I simply asked in the sermon, 'what kind of a sower would be so reckless that he allowed precious seeds to get scattered all over the place?' Well, it should be clear that the sower is God. But, no, God is neither a careless nor a foolish sower. Instead, God is a sower who sows in hope in the knowledge that improvements in soil conditions can happen.

God knows what happens to plants that grow in the sand, but still drops a seed in hope that it will germinate and by then, the organic matters would have been added to improve the sand. God also knows what happens to plants that grow on rocks, but still drops a seed in the hope that when it germinates and develop roots, the roots will be able to find cracks that were caused by erosion and feed off the minerals in the rocks. There are no guarantees in life, even for good soil. So God drops a seed in the good soil in the hope that the gardener can maintain its goodness.

Unlike the God that the Jews knew, who cares only for them, the God that Jesus knew is a God who cares for everyone and gives everyone a chance in life. Jesus' God drops seeds in Samoa, in the shaky isles across the ditch, in the Americas, in Europe, in Africa, in Asia and in the Australian outback! No one is worthless to God. And that is the thread that ties together the Matthean parables like a lei or an *ula*, as we say in Samoa.

Last week, Jesus' God said, 'let the weed grow together with the wheat'. The weed is only a human construction; wild rice or darnel, they are still parts of God's creation. And so we come to today's reading. We have five images of God's kingdom. Like Jesus' God who seems clueless about the reality of life, Jesus again offers images of God's kingdom that are shocking to human sensibility.

A mustard seed is small, but bigger than a eucalyptus seed. And while a eucalyptus plant can grow into a towering tree, a mustard plant is a poor excuse for a plant! It has been described as a shrub, which is not good enough for even a tiny fantail to build a nest in it. Yet, Jesus defiantly says, the kingdom of God is like that, and the birds will rest in it. But it is true; God's love is sufficient for all of us.

Go home and have a look at the other four images; they all carry the same message of kingdom that looks like a Samoan village after a cyclone, with huts torn down and life seemingly taken from it. Yet, when you remove the rubbles, you will be able to find love being shared by the people.

That is God's kingdom, according to Jesus. It is a kingdom that causes one to ask: what? The children sing, 'My God is so big, so strong and so mighty,' and Jesus says it's like a yeast?

It is so improbable, yet it is true. Jesus is speaking the truth, for he turned the symbol of the worst way a person could die, into a symbol of positive influence in the world – that's the foolishness of the cross, according to Paul.

As martyred German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, has said, a key message of the Church has been to 'preach the infinite worth of that which is seemingly worthless'. That is because, according to Jesus, nothing is worthless in the kingdom of God.

That is the idea that has transformed the world and make it a far better place than it might have been.

As a church, the challenge of for us is to help make poor soils become good soils and help all to realise their potentials so we can all help bring God's kingdom to earth.

For the glory of God.

Amen.