

Pentecost 7 – Wesley 9am – 27th July 2014

Theme: “From small beginningsGodly things grow”

Reading: Matthew 13: 31-33 & 44-52

“Five parables of the kingdom of heaven”

Text: “Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasure as well as old.” Matthew 13:52

Introduction

We continue in Matthew’s Gospel following up parables of the last two Sunday’s with five more today. We have already looked at the Sower and the wheat and the weeds. Today’s parables are about the ‘kingdom of heaven’ and what it is like. The first two are shared with the crowds, that of the mustard seed and the yeast, and the last three about the treasure in the field, the pearl of great price and the fish caught in the net are all said only to the disciples.

There are numerous questions raised by Jesus’ teaching here but initially for us today these parables illicit questions like, ‘What is the kingdom of heaven?’ and ‘Why is this so important that Jesus tells so many stories about it both to the crowds and to his inner circle of disciples?’ Let us look initially at these questions and then look specifically at the parables for today and reflect upon them.

The kingdom of heaven

In Matthew’s Gospel the term ‘kingdom of heaven’ is used some 33 times beginning with John the Baptist’s preaching. John came saying, ‘Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.’ Matt 3:2

Jesus also used the same words in the beginning of his ministry where it says after his temptations: “From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Matthew 4:17

This phrase is only used in Matthew’s Gospel. In Mark and Luke the term ‘kingdom of God’ is used but in Matthew it is thought that he uses the ‘kingdom of heaven’ so as not to offend his Jewish listeners. Even back then you had to be careful with your language so as not to upset the sensitivities of others!!

Scholars agree that Jesus uses this image to refer to God’s heavenly and eternal rule, God’s rule on earth in the obedience of the faithful and God’s future rule in the ‘eschaton’ ie, ‘at the end of time’ as we know it (the ‘parusia’ when God will come in all glory).

Scholars raise further issues over what Jesus meant concerning the present rule of God: is it merely a spiritual rule in the hearts and minds of the obedient faithful, or did Jesus intend to establish the reign of God in a more political or social way? This is an ongoing debate and I tend to have a foot firmly in both camps as I see our faith as personal, spiritual but affecting our political and social justice aspect of not only our own lives but also the well-being of others. Hence it is not an either/or for me but a both/and – it is spiritual, here and now as well as political/social justice because of my faith, here and now!!

This answers the passion behind the parables on the 'kingdom of heaven' that Jesus has because he saw this as immediate, life changing, political and bringing forth care and compassion for others. Certainly Jesus, the Christ, showed us what the 'kingdom of heaven' could and would look like in the way he lived his life. Hence these parables are parables for today, as they are 'life changers' if we take them seriously. Jesus certainly did! So now to the parables from our readings for today.

The five parables in Matthew 13:31-33 & 44-52

Firstly, the parable of the mustard seed. (vss 31-32)

In ancient Judaism the mustard seed was seen as the smallest seed that produced a remarkably large plant. It became a large and sturdy tree in which birds could nest. Some interpret the birds nesting in the branches as a reference to the coming of Gentiles into the early church. These words also reflect Daniel 4:21 where Nebuchadnezzar in a dream, sees a tree which reaches to heaven and is visible to the end of the earth. This emphasizes the size of the tree, and in the parable indicates immense growth from small beginnings. The Kingdom of Heaven has begun to come in Jesus' ministry and will grow and in full form attain amazing dimensions.

Secondly, the parable of the yeast or leaven (vs 33)

The second parable speaks of the permeation of a large mass of dough by a small amount of yeast. Probably both the mustard seed and the yeast are similar parables in that both talk about a little thing growing into something large. The difference with the yeast is the way it permeates and penetrates into the whole growing mass. A slightly different approach but growth happens in both parables.

Then we come to the three parables only given to the disciples. The first two are linked through preciousness. The kingdom of heaven is worth more than every alternative life offers.

The third parable – the hidden treasure (vs 44)

In ancient times safe places to deposit money or valuables were hard to find (some things don't change that much!!). Many thought it wisest to bury their treasure in a field. In this parable a man found such treasure buried in a field and it was obvious the current owner had no idea it was there. Hence this individual goes, sell all else and buys the field for the treasure it holds. Jesus uses this story to illustrate the supreme worth of the kingdom of heaven. So often we want to ask questions on the morality of what is done, but we need to remember that the point here is about the treasure of the kingdom of heaven.

Likewise with the fourth parable – the pearl of great value. (vss45-6)

In this parable it re-enforces the enormous worth of the kingdom of heaven in that this pearl merchant finds one of huge worth and sells all to gain it. It doesn't imply that you can buy your way into the kingdom of heaven. That is not the point. Rather the value of being part of the kingdom of heaven is what the parable is all about.

Finally, the parable of the net and the interpretation. (vss47-50)

This dragnet was a familiar sight for those hearers from around the Sea of Galilee. They would regularly see the fishermen pulling their nets and sorting the edible fish from the inedible ones. This imagery is used to describe the sorting out of the good and the bad in the kingdom of heaven, which is similar to the interpretation of the earlier parable of the wheat and the weeds.

Matthew certainly held the view that at the end of the age not only the obviously evil but also the pretenders to goodness will be identified for what they really are and given their eternal place in keeping with their own decisions. Hence, implicit is the encouragement to be faithful to Jesus and his teachings and to embrace 'the kingdom of heaven'.

Concluding words in vss 51-52

Here Jesus checks if the disciple have understood 'all these things' referring to the parables within this chapter of Matthew which holds within it seven parables. They answer 'Yes', I think to please Jesus because we still struggle with both understanding and living out the meaning of the parables and I'm sure Jesus' disciples were likewise!

Jesus then uses a parable about parables to encourage his disciples, having called them 'scribes or teachers of the law who have been instructed about the kingdom of heaven being like.....' and then follows the parable of the owner of the house. Jesus has trained his disciples by attaching new interpretations to old images and talking about new growth, new understanding of 'the kingdom of heaven.

Reflection for ourselves

If we take nothing else away from these readings except the following two things I think we will have grasped an aspect of the parables of the 'kingdom of heaven'.

1. We need to be enthusiastic about our faith. To be anything less is not to be faithful to Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of heaven. Age has nothing to do with enthusiasm – children and the not so young need to be enthusiastic in and for our faith. My daughter and son-in-law can't believe it but Joshua, our grandson's favourite book at the moment is his 'Children's Bible'. In a sense this is how it should be for all of us as we live out our faith – we should be seeking to develop our faith.
2. We also need to use language and images that others can understand. This is the much harder area of witnessing to our faith especially with people with no faith or people who have put their Christian faith to 'one side' in a sense saying I don't need this anymore. Language and actions in our faith arena are both equally important. Jesus uses parables to teach. We need also parables for life today. Some of those are simply lived out lives for Christ as if the 'kingdom of heaven' is here and now as well as in the future.

From 'little things.....Godly things grow!' Amen!