

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Finding Heaven in the ordinary

“Have some vegetable plants for your garden”, my mum said, “I’ve grown them from seed”. I looked at the little seedlings warily, but decided that I might branch out from patio tomatoes – what harm could it do? My mum’s parting words were “make sure you space them out”. I should have taken that as a warning. A few weeks later, the garden had been taken over by monster butternut squash; everywhere I looked, yet another squash was hiding. And indeed, the cats and other animals snoozed in the shade of the gigantic leaves.

Jesus talks about things that grow very fast in our gospel reading today. He says the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. If you were a 1st century Jew your jaw might drop at this point. The crowd’s first reaction probably was “did you hear what he just said?” they were certainly *not* thinking, “ah what a mighty shrub grows from such a tiny seed” but... why on earth would anyone sow that troublesome weed in a field? In no time at all it would spread out of control; invading other crops, wreaking havoc and breaking the Levitical law that two types of seed should not grow together. If someone let it grow as tall as a tree – well that was down right outrageous. When your survival depended on the crops that you grew, you did not sow a mustard seed and let it flourish. If your crop had to compete with the weeds, hunger could be around the corner and you might have to do some fast-talking when the Romans came looking for their tax on crops. So, is this parable saying something more than big things grow from small insignificant things? I think so.

The next parable is also not all that it seems at first glance. Yes, yeast is also very tiny and it grows at an astonishing rate, but again Jesus saying *the kingdom of heaven is like yeast* was shocking to the Jewish audience.

In Jewish tradition, yeast was almost always a symbol of worldly corruption, surely the very opposite of God's kingdom. The three measures of flour used by the woman amounted about 10 gallons, enough to feed 150 people. The thought of one housewife in her kitchen kneading this amount of dough is almost as bizarre as farmer letting a weed grow so big that birds could roost in its branches. What on earth was Jesus saying? Perhaps it is that you can do something very very ordinary, sow a seed, mix yeast with flour and water and then something very extraordinary happens; what happens next has nothing to do with human effort; it does not depend on us. That essence of creativity, the super abundance, the sheer extravagance, the magnificent out of the hum drum, the unexpected out of the ordinary – perhaps these things signpost the kingdom of heaven

The parables in Matthew's gospel come at a fierce rate and next we are on to the buried treasure. The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. A man finds treasure by accident, a stroke of luck and with delight, he sells all he has and buys the field. I wonder if he told the owner what he had found on his land. I don't think so. Was it ethical? Was it legal? Was the man a cheat? In his parables, Jesus does not shy away from characters who use dubious means to get what they want, but more importantly, Jesus instils a sense of urgency. If treasure comes your way, seize it quickly. Do what you need to do, do not hesitate and lose sight of the kingdom of God – you need to keep your eyes open, be always ready- we have heard Jesus say this before.

And finally, the parable of the pearl. In the 1st century Mediterranean world, the pearl was the symbol of most worth and desirability, a bit like diamonds are regarded by some today. Here the man is a merchant; it is his business to buy and sell. He does not find the pearl by accident, he seeks it out using skill and experience; but the end result is the same as the man who found the treasure in the field. He sells all he has

to acquire the thing of most value. Could it be that Jesus is saying it does not matter how you find the kingdom of heaven, how you find your way to faith, but once you catch a glimpse, once you feel the presence of God, you must act. You must do something. Indeed the parables themselves are designed to make us listen, puzzle and then do some work. Theologian, Ulrich Luz said that we do not understand the kingdom of heaven by sitting on a nice sofa; we do not understand the kingdom of heaven by exegesis, Bible study alone. I think he means that we need to actively engage our heart and souls as well as our mind; we need be alert and be open, take onboard the urgency and as our first two parables tell us, look for heaven in the ordinary, heaven in the everyday things here on earth.

Whilst three of parables allude to something hidden from view, something that we have to find, we do not necessarily have to go looking for signs of the kingdom of heaven in holy places. God can be present in our workplace and homes, as Teresa of Avila said, God can be found amongst the pots and pans..... If we only look.

We can see glimpses of heaven in other people. I remember during my first year of training, a small group of us were sent to work in a church in South London. It is statistically the most impoverished ward in London. The congregation was 90% first or second generation African. If I felt way out of my depth, things were about to get worse my group put me in charge of the teenagers. I invited them to write or draw what they liked about their community and how their church could make a difference. One small chap sat entirely on his own in silence, so I encouraged him to draw. My colleagues then invited members of the congregation to take a microphone and describe their ideas. I looked at the small chap and he looked at me. Then he got up, edged up to the front, took the microphone and went on to talk slowly about his picture, how God could help his community and what he thought heaven would *look like*. – here and now. I thought he was very brave, it was a very large congregation,

but the churchwarden just shook her head in amazement. She told me afterwards that the boy had a severe speech impediment and rarely ever spoke. We agreed that we had seen a glimpse of heaven that day.

We, none of us, are not able to find the words to describe the kingdom of heaven in its fullness; the words just do not exist, but Jesus tells us what it is like and how we can see it here on earth. He speaks of the ordinary, men, women, seeds, birds, bread and also earthly treasure, things we can see and touch. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, "it is in the ordinary that we must dig for the kingdom of heaven, these are the places to look for the will and presence of God. If we cannot find them here, we will never find them anywhere else, for earth is where the seeds of heaven are sown and their treasure is the only thing worth having¹". Amen.

¹ *The Seeds of Heaven; Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (2004).