

Holy Trinity WOT
Trinity 8 July 30th 2023
Matthew 13.44-53
Canon Bruce Saunders

We've just heard what I think is one of the most fascinating, possibly absurd, but really rather moving verses in the whole of the New Testament.

Jesus' parable stories were delivered at different times and in different places as he travelled around. But the people who wrote what we call Matthew's Gospel hadn't been there at the time, so had no way of knowing where or when many of these stories had first been told. So, like the other Gospel writers, Matthew carefully put the stories in the places where they seem to fit best. In this case as a sequence of parables and sayings, some of them very short, all of which are about the Kingdom of Heaven. *'The Kingdom of heaven is like..... mustard seed that takes over the whole plot; yeast that infiltrates [remember the fantastic sermon our visiting preacher gave on those two parables during Christian Aid Week?]. 'The Kingdom of heaven is like' treasure hidden in a field; it's like a priceless pearl; it's like a net full of fish.*

Jesus uses a fantastic variety of images and pictures to try to convey something that for him was so real.

Parables are like poems or riddles, they hint and point, they suggest and allude. They make us do the work. And what Jesus tells us about the Kingdom of heaven is full of challenges and surprises. The parables are much more radical and difficult than we were ever taught in Sunday School.

And then comes this verse which I described as both absurd and deeply moving. After this enormous pile of enigma and allusion, of similes and analogies, Jesus says to the disciples "Have you understood all this?" And they answer "Yes".

What were they saying? How could they possibly understand? Their subsequent behaviour and their repeated missing of the point show that they didn't. But they wanted to understand. I'm sure they did. And they had got some glimmer of an idea of what Jesus was all about. They had, after all, left their homes, their work, their parents and wives and children, to be with this man. So, what were they to say in answer to his impossible question? They said Yes not because they truly understood but because they didn't want to say No.

The people who wrote Matthew's Gospel, maybe 40 years after the death of Jesus, sympathised with those first disciples because they found themselves in much the same situation when it came to understanding what Jesus meant by the Kingdom. After the death and resurrection of the one they believed to be the Messiah, the Kingdom had not come as many had expected. What was it? Where was it?

And it shouldn't be difficult for us to sympathise with their dilemma either because are we not all in much the same position? We too are intrigued by Jesus and by the Father he talks of and by the Kingdom he sees so clearly. But when Jesus talks about his followers moving mountains, infiltrating society and turning the world upside down, transforming individual lives from fear to

freedom and bringing light and hope into the darkest and most terrifying places in our world and in our hearts; when he talks of these things, can we say we understand? We understand enough to know that it will require more of us than we are prepared to give, but neither can we let him go; and we don't want God to let us go either. We can't quite say Yes but we don't want to say No either.

Clever theologians have been trying for centuries to understand better what Jesus meant by the Kingdom. Is it a place? Is it a state of mind or a way of living? Is it about the values on which we build our lives? Is it somewhere wonderful we go when we die? Will the Kingdom happen if we vote for the right political party? Christ is risen. So maybe the Kingdom has already come, and we are in the Kingdom now? Or is it tomorrow? Can we build the Kingdom by doing the right kind of things – loving our neighbour, recycling our plastics, saying our prayers, donating to charity? If Earth lasts long enough and human society continues to evolve, will things get better and better, and the Kingdom eventually and inevitably come? Or will it only come on some terrible Last Day of Judgement? Or does the Kingdom just come in God's own mysterious time and in God's own mysterious way?

It's tragic that something which is so close to the heart of Jesus' teaching, something that he talks about constantly and is clearly the vision that impels him, should be so hard for us to get hold of. Do we understand? Well, no. I don't think we do. We long for a world of peace and justice, of integrity and generosity – and all those things are worth living and working for. But is that what Jesus meant by the Kingdom? Is the Kingdom peaceful, calm and stress-free – like the TV adverts for retirement homes? Doesn't Jesus suggest it's a place of growing, of searching, of being fully naked in the sight of God? It sounds quite demanding to me!

Looking it up in the Bible doesn't help a lot. In Luke 17, the Pharisees ask Jesus when the Kingdom of God will come, and Jesus says '*When it comes, people won't say 'Here it is or there it is'.* The Kingdom of God is, in Greek, *entos humon*. The King James Bible translated that as 'within you', later versions as 'among you'. In both cases the '*you*' is plural – it's an 'us' not a 'me' word, an 'us together', a community word; so 'among' may convey it better than 'within'. But can he mean that the Kingdom is among the Pharisees whom he's talking to at the time? Might he mean that he, the embodiment of God's Kingdom, is standing there among them. So maybe Christ, the embodiment of God's will and purpose, is among us too. ('When two or three are gathered together in his name...')

Similar questions arise in Mark 1: Jesus says the Kingdom is 'at hand'. Does that mean it's not far away and it will be along in a minute like a Number1 bus, or that you can reach out and feel it, handle it?

Some years ago, feminist theologians, disliking the maleness of the word 'Kingdom', started talking about the 'realm' of God. I think that's rather good. The realm of God is where God's rule holds sway, where God's will is done, where God is acknowledged and worshipped as God, where people recognise themselves as citizens of heaven and live on earth accordingly. That can be here and now and then and tomorrow.

So, did the disciples understand this tantalising reality that Jesus was trying to share with them? I think we can safely say No – not until much, much later. Do we understand? I think we can safely say that even now we're still working on the question, that it still challenges and bothers

and attracts us and says something to us about God and ourselves that we cannot simply put aside. We go on trying to say Yes.

Is the Kingdom here? Signs of the Kingdom are all around us for the recognising. We only have to open our eyes. Is the world therefore perfect and heavenly – no it certainly isn't so the Kingdom in its fullness is not yet. But we know Jesus invites us to walk with him as citizens of the community of heaven now and every day.

I think of the Kingdom in terms of vertical time rather than horizontal. Not that the Kingdom will come one day, but that it is possible to live two-dimensionally – on earth and in God's kingdom at the same time; and sometimes, in prayer or in worship or in a real experience of love, they merge, as they do every time we celebrate the Eucharist. The daily challenge of living faithfully with God as King is quite hard enough for me. And the big cosmic unanswerables, I happily leave in God's hands while I go on trying to say Yes.