Sermon for 17th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Genesis 29:15-28; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52.

i

What a disappointment Jesus was. They had longed for a Messiah for many years. Now there was something in the air. Several plausible Messiahs had appeared in recent years, as Gamaliel recounts in his speech against the Christians in Acts 5:36-37. They had come to nothing, both leading nationalist revolts against Rome, only to be defeated. At least they looked like what a Messiah was supposed to look like. But Jesus made a very dubious Messiah. Jesus did not wish to incite a rebellion against Rome by a dramatic military and political upheaval, but fought against his own Jewish leaders and those on the zealot wing of politics. He saw his own Jewish leaders as more of a threat than Rome. How could a defeated, crucified Messiah with a motley band of followers possibly be the promised kingdom?

Many of the parables of Jesus attempt to elucidate how to recognise the kingdom in its first, tender beginnings.

The *Parable of the Mustard Seed* portrays the tiny, insignificant beginnings of the global, cosmic kingdom of God. Jesus, who never travelled more than a few miles from his home town, who never spoke on the Areopagus in Athens, or confronted Caesar in the forum, with his insignificant band of insignificant followers, he was to be the one who would indeed “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). Yet the kingdom would not dawn overnight on the day of the resurrection, but from a tiny seed a mighty tree would grow. The birds of the air represent the gentile nations finding ultimate refuge within this growing kingdom.

When the Church is faced with mountainous opposition or oceans of indifference it is tempting to believe the cause is lost, but Christian history tells us to continue in faith because great things can grow from the smallest beginnings. The *Parable of the Leaven* tells us that much of the growth in the kingdom will take place long before it is obvious to the eyes of the world. Yet just a small amount of faith can reap huge rewards. A small piece of leaven will raise a large measure of dough. Jesus spoke on another occasion of the mustard seed, when he said that anyone with even a mustard seed of faith could uproot the tree and send it flying into the sea (Luke 17:6).

The future is beyond our rational minds to envisage. We must not give up in the face of opposition or failure, or lose patience because we desire quick results from our meagre efforts.

ii

The kingdom is worth waiting for because it is valuable beyond all earthly wealth. It is like a treasure hidden in a field – that is so valuable it merits selling – joyfully – all you have in order to buy that field. Nothing else in the world rivals what can be found in the kingdom.

The kingdom is still hidden to the world. To the world the field is just a field. To the world the man would appear crazy to sell everything in order to buy a field, but to the person who has found the hidden treasure of fellowship with Jesus Christ, it is possible to give up other treasure joyfully in order to obtain it. The fact that the treasure is still hidden to those who haven’t found it yet does not undermine its truly stupendous, life-changing value.

*The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price* features a person, who, unlike the man in the previous parable who stumbles upon the treasure in the field, is seeking fine pearls. To those educated in seeking fine pearls, there is no other pearl to rival this one. However many other pearls you already own, they are nothing in comparison. It too, as in the previous parable, is worth selling everything in order to obtain it.

It reminds us of Paul’s story, who counted “everything as a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost everything” (Philippians 3:8).

Clearly, the kingdom calls for incredibly brave, decisive action. How many of us would “joyfully” sell “everything” we own – or whatever else that would be the equivalent in our lives? How important is the kingdom to you? What would you give up in order to keep hold of Christ’s kingdom?

The following *Parable of the Net* closes this collection of parables with an illustration of why it is worth holding on even in the face of slow progress, or worth surrendering worldly treasure in order to obtain the kingdom. This parable depicts eschatological judgment; the angels will collect the good fish and throw the bad fish away. This warns us that keeping faithful to the kingdom through difficult times, or making huge sacrifices in order to follow Christ, make sense. Eternity depends upon it.

iii

The insights of these parables will help us interpret the other two readings which we have heard today.

Paul may count all his past achievements under the Law as “worthless” in comparison to knowing Christ Jesus; he may have also asserted earlier in *Romans 8* that the whole of creation has now been redeemed from futility by Christ, but this does not mean that Paul has all the answers, that he is certain of all things, or that he sees everything clearly (1 Corinthians 13:12). Paul admits that “we do not know what we ought to pray for” (v26), but knows that the Spirit “helps us in our weakness”.

Even the underwhelming witness that many Christians give of the kingdom should not deter us. Even St Paul did not know everything, but loving Christ is sufficient for the Spirit to do what we cannot do for ourselves. God has predestined those who freely turn to Christ shall, by the Spirit’s grace, be justified, conformed to the likeness of the Son and glorified (vv29-30). The Church will disappoint us frequently, but we should continue on in faith.

The kingdom is a work in progress – both in each believer as well as in the world. If the builder is still on site, we wouldn’t cancel the contract for our new home just because the builder has only completed the foundations. We would rejoice that we could see the beginnings of our future home and allow the work to continue with growing anticipation. So it should be with the kingdom.

In the case of Jacob’s story from Genesis 29:15-28, we see Jacob getting a dose of his own medicine. He who tricked his father into giving him his brother Esau’s blessing, is now tricked himself by his uncle Laban who marries him off to the less desirable Leah.

The story makes for a comic opera of a tale. Jacob the trickster is tricked. He works seven long years to get his bride and in his eagerness he doesn’t even lift the veil to see which sister he’s taken to bed until the following morning. His wily old uncle Laban extracts another seven years labour out of him for Jacob’s intended, Rachel.

Yet within the comic twists and turns of this folktale are the same lessons that we hear again in the parables of Jesus. Jacob could have walked away in disgust at his treatment. Jacob, however, exercises patience. He endures the duplicitous treatment of Laban and works an additional seven years for Rachel. The setback of finding Leah in his marital bed rather than Rachel turned out for the best.

We forget too easily that of the 12 sons of Jacob who constituted the 12 tribes of the people of Israel, only two sons were borne by Rachel. Four sons were born to Bilhah and Zilpah, two servant women, and 6 were born to Leah.

Be patient. Trust God to work for the good of those who love him, (to borrow Paul’s words). For even when disaster, defeat, delay or duplicity strike, God can still be at work, fulfilling his ultimate purpose.

Great things come from uncertain, small beginnings. The world may not see it, but the treasure you have found in Jesus surpasses anything that the world may give.

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