

A Reflection from Revd Ali Massey for Trinity 7

Over the last two weeks, we have heard some of Jesus' parables concerning sowers, soils and weeds. Today, we had the remaining short parables to complete chapter 13 of Matthew's Gospel. The eagle-eyed amongst you will have noticed that the lectionary unravels the chapter a little, to allow for the explanation of the parable of the weeds in the same week as that parable is shared, otherwise it would have been a bit of a cliff-hanger waiting all week for the denouement!

This week's reading is a whistle-stop tour through 5 more of Jesus' parables. The parable of the mustard seed is also found in the gospels of Mark (4: 30 - 32) and Luke (13: 18,19). The parable of the leaven is found in Luke (13: 20,21) but the final three are unique to Matthew's gospel. Jesus in verse 51, asks his disciples 'have you understood all these things?' despite Matthew not recording any explanation of the later parables. I wonder if, as Mark suggests in chapter 4 verse 34, that 'when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.' Perhaps Jesus took the time to unpack the parables for his disciples when the crowds had dispersed.

This week's parables are short and to the point. They are easy to remember and maybe that's why Jesus didn't explain (or perhaps Matthew didn't document him explaining) the parables to the listening crowds. Maybe there is something about the parables that the crowd needed to take away and ponder.

One of things that I love to do, is to share sacred stories and liturgy with children. Sometimes I use a technique called Godly Play. Godly Play is a way of sharing stories using very simple resources and then allowing time to 'wonder' together after the story has been told. The 'wondering' is facilitated by using open questions to allow the children to work out for themselves what the story means to them. When I share Jesus' parables, I use a parable box. The parable box creates a common construct around each of the parables. The parable box is gold, but not shiny gold. It looks a little bit battered and it has a lid. The imagery of the box is to indicate that parables are old, as it has been at least 2000 years since Jesus first shared them. The box is gold to represent how precious the parable, and indeed all of Jesus' words are. And the box has a lid, because parables are sometimes hard to get into. Unless we have explicit explanations from Jesus, then we have to wrestle with the parable to seek its meaning for us. I wonder if that's what happened that day on the lakeside. Jesus offering the parables then expecting the crowd to think and discuss them and find meaning for themselves.

The first two parables today, the mustard seed and the leaven are sandwiched in between the parable of the weeds and its explanation. Each of these three parables exhibiting organic growth from something seemingly small and insignificant. The seeds and the leaven are transformed into something large and unmissable. The field full of wheat, albeit with associated weeds, the tree that is big enough to host birds and their nests, and the bread that would be enough to feed a whole village. Jesus telling the crowd, and us, something of the extraordinary transformational power of the Word of God.

I wonder if these parables of exponential growth could give us confidence when we feel small and insignificant? Or when we feel that our attempts at sharing our experience of the risen Christ and our relationship with God are a bit feeble. God takes the smallest thing that we offer and blesses it with kingdom growth formula. We often don't know how our words or our witness are received. As Paul reminds us (1 Corinthians 3: 6) if we plant the seed, it might be watered by someone else but it is God who gives the growth. Just as Jesus reminds us later on in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 17: 20,21) that if we just have faith, as tiny as that virtually invisible mustard seed, we too can move mountains.

Jesus then moves on to telling parables about discovering the word of God, and how that discovery is also transformational. I wonder, if the first man who found the treasure in the field was actually looking for the treasure or was it an accidental discovery? Perhaps while preparing

the field to plant crops? Whilst the second man looking for the pearl of great price, certainly sounds like he was on a mission to discover the best and most beautiful pearl. But however they came to their discoveries, the transformation is the same. Their lives are changed. They give up everything else that they owned to possess the one great thing. They understood that nothing else would ever come close. I wonder if that might resonate with our experience of coming to faith? Was the transformational love of God something that we have actively sought, or something that was serendipitous?

Reflecting on my own journey of faith, I was searching for a long time but not sure what I was looking for. Seeking meaning in places where it wasn't to be found. But eventually encountering the risen Christ in a way that transformed my life and has led me to be here with you today.

Jesus' final parable in today's reading reminds us, as in the parable of the weeds, that at the end of the age there will be a time of judgement. None of the fish in the net chose to be caught, but there is a choice to be made by each of us. By living our lives by kingdom values, we can choose to become like the good fish rather than ending up thrown away with the bad.

At the end of the reading, Jesus checks the disciples' understanding of all that he had taught them. He tells them, and us, that when we become disciples of the kingdom of heaven, when we wrestle with Jesus' teaching, then we too shall find new treasure. Tradition and perceived wisdom is not all there is.

The theologian Ian Paul sums this up by saying 'In the kingdom of heaven, set out in the teaching and ministry of Jesus, God is doing a radical new thing—the same radical new thing that he has always been doing. He is the living God. And this new work of grace is one that demands a response.

So that is both our choice and our challenge, are we willing to seek and receive this incredible new gift of grace? And if we are, are we ready to be transformed?

In Jesus' name
Amen