

Pentecost 12
24/07/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 29:15 - 28

Psalm 105

Romans 8:26 - 39

Matthew 13:31 - 33, 44 - 52

Living the Kingdom life

The Kingdom of Heaven is like...

- a tiny mustard seed that grows into a great tree,
- a tiny amount of yeast in a large measure of flour,
- treasure hidden in a field,
- the finest, most valuable pearl,
- a net thrown into the sea that catches every kind of fish.

Have you understood this?

Both Jesus and John were proclaimers of the Kingdom of Heaven. By this they did not imagine a new institution being formed, with plate glass doors posh lettering on the outside and people in tailored suits. What they did imagine was a new state of affairs that would exist between people and with the world we live in, because life would be lived according to the reign of God: God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.

The present section of Matthew Chapter 13 began with the parable of the sower, which is about how the Good Seed of God's reign is spread on the earth. Its progress is not straightforward. Sometimes it is lost completely, sometimes it struggles to survive just a little, and sometimes it produces an awesome abundance that gladdens the heart. You can see this as a recipe for optimism, or you can see it as meaning living by faith is always going to be a struggle. It is both of these things.

In Jesus' day there was a widespread view that the world had fallen out of God's hands into the hands of Satan. This captivity to evil manifested itself as sickness, demon possession, oppressive political structures, and all that was understood to be sin – life lived against God. [Byrne, *Lifting the Burden* p 35ff – a number of ideas in this sermon originated with this book.] We might talk about life lived against God as living under the tutelage of negative and destructive forces like rampant militarism, unchecked free-market practices, rampant racism or unthinking allegiance to fundamentalist right wing religion.

For some time prior to the time of Jesus, particularly because of the dominance of Rome, it seemed to many that the life and freedom promised by the prophets, particularly Isaiah, had been deferred. But when John the Baptist emerged, a heightened sense of expectation arose, and people began to re-engage with the living hope that their burdens would be lifted, the cycle of oppression and alienation would be broken, and God's rule would be re-asserted in the world.

The hope of the coming Reign of God, in Matthew's language Kingdom of Heaven, is embedded like precious jewels in the proclamation of the Church. This hope is about Good News: positive things. And it is also about Judgement, something that is more difficult for us to handle, because it involves someone missing out. Judgement is God's action for the righteous, it brings liberty for the oppressed; it involves action to restore a proper balance to life in the world. Every time a right balance is restored, whether at the shores of the Red Sea, or when protective labour laws are invoked to enable sweatshop workers to receive fair pay and conditions, then some people are left looking silly with egg on their faces. Imagine if the world finally faced up the problem of Israel's relationship with Palestine, and insisted on a just distribution of land and human rights. Some would look silly, just as the Roman Soldiers did outside the Tomb on Easter morning and some would be delighted.

"From Little Things Big Things Grow" is the name of a Paul Kelly song that celebrated the genesis of the Land Rights movement in Australia. The first two parables imagine the coming of the Rule of God as small things, like a mustard seed or a tiny portion of yeast the size and appearance of which belies its real power and strength. Each may develop so remarkably that all normal expectations are defied. Where our tendency is to think of big programmes and visionary projects, Jesus teaches that God is God to such an extent that the smallest things can have a huge and permeating effect.

The second set of stories about the treasure in the field and the pearl of great value also resound with hope. Whether you stumble across it, or set out deliberately to find it, the most precious thing, God's presence, is in the world and can be found. Engaging with this is more than simply a matter of interest, like collecting antiques or gemstones. It puts a challenge to us that is so deep it can result in the whole of our life being re-arranged. There is profound hope here but it involves discernment or judgment.

Some are ready to take on the challenge of Kingdom life, some are not, which is one reason the story of the big catch of fish follows. Imagine a net full of schnapper, tuna and barramundi all mixed up with blowies, stingrays and seas snakes. When it comes to life in church and society there is no identifiably righteous group. We are all mixed up together like the wheat and the tares. But the promise of the Kingdom is that there will be a day of discernment. The time will come when things will be put right and the good will endure. This is in essence what is hinted at for us in the proclamation of the Resurrection. There is judgement here, but God is the judge, not us. We live in hope of God's action to vindicate the righteous, but there will also be disappointment for some.

Jesus asks if his audience can understand this? If they do, he says they have graduated to become scribes of the Kingdom: teachers who are so immersed in the old, and its connection with the present that they can draw on the treasures of both.

The idea of the reign of God is not a Gospel innovation. The idea of the sovereignty of God is everywhere to be found in the Hebrew Scriptures. What is new is the way Jesus teaches and talks about it. That is why we are here. He is the scribe who is training his disciples in how to draw from the treasury of both new and old. This is not for antiquarian interest. It involves doing our “re-imagining” of life in the light what we have learned from him. The followers of Christ are Kingdom people who, who through text, song and ritual shared in community, are open to discovering life in small, ordinary things that have their roots in this world and yet point to the wonder of the inexpressible.

In this process they also discover process precious things about how God sees us. God comes in search of us to plant the seed of the Kingdom amongst us, that we may have its benefits. It was God who looked on the field of the world and saw in it the priceless treasure of human life and love. The Gospel declares how God gave everything God had to purchase that field so that life would not be wasted, but be given back to its source. In this way God seeded the world with something that has the power to permeate everything, like the teaspoon of yeast that was mixed with a huge measure of flour to create the finest of bread. More than enough for party!
