

Pentecost 8
30/7/2017

Mark the Evangelist

1 Kings 3:5-12
Psalm 119:129-136
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Again, the parables

The thing about the parables of Jesus is that they *are* his message.

As we noted last week, the parables are not something to be *translated* or *reduced* to some more basic concept. To hear the parables *is* to hear the “word”. It would seem, then, that the work of the evangelist – the preacher – is done when the parables are read. So it might be said, Here endeth the lesson; and I could now sit down. Perhaps, however, we might still say something useful, not so much about what the parables “mean” as about *how* they mean, or how they point us out of ourselves into the kingdom of heaven.

If there is a “heart” to Jesus’ message, it is that the kingdom of God – the reign of God, the proper relation of God and the world – draws near. The parables are “windows” into this nearness of the kingdom.

We can begin to get a sense for *how* they are such windows by noting just how *ordinary* are the things presented to us as parables: a treasure hunter, a woman making bread, seeds in a field, farmers and fisher folk. The images are concrete and familiar. Sometimes there’s a surprise – especially in the longer narrative parables – but even the surprises make their own kind of sense.

Because of their concreteness and day-to-day familiarity we might not recognise that there are, in fact, no *ideas* in the parables, no *abstractions*. The existence of God, the question of suffering, the meaning of life – no such things are entertained or addressed in the parables.

The parables *are* concrete, but Jesus’ use of what is ordinary and tangible to speak of the kingdom of heaven gives the familiar and concrete world a peculiar depth and colour, as if wiping away dust which has settled on all things. What is ordinary is tied to what, we imagine, is not: God. *This* world – where any netting at life catches the good and the bad, where it takes so much effort to leaven the dough, where distorting desires for treasure are the way of the human heart – this world becomes a new kind of “ordinary”, teeming with God.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

From almost nothing something grows in which God make a home.

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

A woman toils to pound the yeast throughout the whole batch of dough, that God might be leaven not just to a part but to all of creation.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

A man discovers a pearl which is worth all that he has – as God values and purchases each and every one of us.

How God is for the world in the parables is how, properly, the world is within itself: open to be receptive of God, however closed it might appear and however distant God might seem.

Jesus uses what is natural to invite us into a *new* experience of what is natural. No longer do seeds merely grow, bakers merely bake or farmers toil. These things become the possibility of knowing that God is active in and with the world.

We might be tempted in all this to limit parables of God’s activity to “good” images. By this we say that, in fact, God is only present in and to *some* of the world. Our debates among ourselves – the things that divide us – have to do with identifying those godforsaken places and avoiding them, as we imagine that God must.

Probably, we cannot avoid those debates.

But at the heart of Christian understanding is precisely God’s presence in the godforsaken, where no one can see God, where the window to the kingdom is broken and we have boarded it up and there is nothing to be seen.

We are almost at the point in the gospel story where Jesus begins to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life (Matthew 16.21ff).

This history – the Passion – becomes a parable itself. It differs from the other parables in that it *is* a history and not a general image about seeds or wedding feasts. But its historical character is not something *in itself* to believe. We don’t have, on the one hand, historical facts and, on the other hand, general observations extracted from experience, so that we can recognise the meaning of the parable images but not of the cross, or the other way around. The cross and resurrection point to the parables, and the parables point to the cross. The cross tells us that what is broken – broken even to the point of godforsakenness – even in this God can be *for* the world. The parables take the secular and mundane and do just the same. God is near to us in all things.

This is *not* easy to grasp; perhaps we will not, in the end, understand it.

At the end of our reading today, Jesus asks the disciples, “Have you understood all of this?” They answer, “Yep!”.

This has to be an *ironic* answer – if not for the half-understanding disciples themselves, then for the gospel account as a whole. And it has to be ironic for us too, were we to be asked the question and to answer it in the same way.

For we, as did those disciples as the story unfolds, experience no small part of life and world as places where God is not, as Godless and so hopeless. In this we find ourselves disoriented from God. The world is cut adrift.

But this is what the parable-windows of our baptism and Eucharist open onto: life out of death; godless brokenness *by* you and brokenness *of* you now made a near-God brokenness “*for* you,” that you might be made whole. What we would leave behind and forget as old, godless and dead, God makes a treasure, a lively seed in the fertile soil, even himself.

To be trained for the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says, is to be one who brings out of his treasure old things, as new. It is to be one who sees the world with new eyes and is beginning to experience what she sees with a growing joy and more confident hope because she is discovering that the kingdom of heaven is very near.

To what shall we compare the kingdom of heaven? The world, the lives of each and everyone of us. Because God is very near, to finish the creative work of love we are to become.

By the grace of God may the discover of God's closeness, and the joy in hope which comes with it, be ever increasingly our reality and that of all God's people.

Amen.
