

VPBC Sermon 6th August 2017 Speaker: Geoff Thorington-Hassell.

The parable of the weeds. The mystery of the Kingdom. Why does evil persist?

Matt 13:24-30, 36-43

With Jane away over the summer, on retreat at St Buenos in North Wales, I have been asked to cover the talks for the next five weeks. Given it is August there is likely to be a lot of churn with people away and occasional visitors. So rather than a unified series of talks I thought to stick with a series of talks where if you miss one, it doesn't matter. Nonetheless I did think to have a theme to coincide with our **theme this year- "the Jesus we never knew."** All five talks are from the same chapter in the bible, Matthew 13. In each talk we will look at a parable that Jesus told and think about what clues it gives us to Jesus teaching on the Kingdom of God. This is an idea that is central to the mission and the teaching of Jesus. I also partly chose this chapter, which has a high concentration of the 40 to 46 parables, (the number varies depending on how you classify them to number them) contained in the gospels. Yet mainly, given it is the summer season, these are told by the seaside. Galilee on Sea. Where, like Brighton beach on a sizzling summer day, it was packed. Packed to the extent that Jesus had to teach from a boat and push out a little from the shore. The incidents here are therefore on a boat, at the seaside and later on the conversation continues on in a house, perhaps a holiday home?

In *Matthew 13* there are seven or eight parables. The first is very well known. The parable of the sower, or it might be better described as the parable of the soils. Both this and the second parable Jesus explains privately to his disciples. With the sower it is possible he discussed this in the boat he was using as a private conversation. In the second parable, the explanation of which was again in private but this time it was in a nearby house. The first four parables, including the mustard seed and the yeast parable are all about the growth of the kingdom. They are spoken in public. The remaining four are in the privacy of the holiday home - the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, the drag net and the householder. Now the householder in *Matt 13:52* you might say is a bit of a cheat as a parable and is more like a saying but my reason for including it as a parable is that for seven of these eight parables Jesus introduces them as "the kingdom of heaven is like...." – and this is one of them.

So, given we have eight parables and five sessions I have decided to break down the talks like this, beginning with the parable of the weeds. I have decided to ignore the parable of the sower as although this is the starting point for the rest of the parables and the reason for the division we shall see later that is introduced by Jesus in the way he will teach from now on, I thought you have heard plenty enough sermons on the sower and to begin therefore with the next parable of the weeds.

Over these next five weeks we will ask five questions as we think about what the parables reveal to us about the Kingdom of God. Today is "Why does evil persist?" when looking at the parable of the weeds. Then "Why is the Kingdom so insignificant? for the 13th August followed by "why is the kingdom so hidden ?" looking at breadmaking. The two parables of the buried treasure and the pearl of great price is on 27th August with the question "How do people find the kingdom of God?" Lastly on September 3rd "What will your response be?" looking at the householder Jesus refers to in *Matt 13:52*.

Before we look at the weeds a few thoughts about parables. The word parable does not yet appear in Matthew till now. In chapters 11 and 12 there were divisions and conflicts from various groups over Jesus and his teachings and activity. In the face of family pressure, on top of all the other pressures, Jesus says *“Whoever does what my Father in heaven wants is my brother, my sister, my mother”* (Matt 12:48).

The purpose of the parables is laid out in Matt 13:10-17. These verses are crucial to the chapter as a whole in setting out the division between the enlightened disciples and the unresponsive crowd. The celebrity status of Jesus is such a draw that the crowd is so large that he has to get into a boat to sit in while the crowd stand on the shore listening (Matt 13:1,2). They hear the parables, but it is to the disciples that the explanations are given. It is a private conversation. This marks a change and the disciples note it. The disciples, like the crowd, had heard the parable of the sower and although a simple story related to everyday life they knew that the cryptic nature of it meant that some in the crowd, themselves included for that matter, would not understand it. So, they come to Jesus and ask him about his using this form of teaching rather than using plain statements. In Matt 13:10 ***“then the disciples came to Jesus and asked him” why do you use parables when you talk to the people?”***

Jesus reference to Isaiah 6:9-10 is repeated in full by Matthew. It is that, like the Old Testament prophet, he is – despite his evident popularity- suffering a similar **unresponsive** response. *“This people will listen and listen, but not understand. They will look and look but not see, because their minds are dull and they have stopped up their ears and have closed their eyes.”* The **Message Bible** is even more blunt *“Your ears are open but you don’t hear a thing. Your eyes are awake, but you don’t see a thing. The people are blockheads! They stick their fingers in their ears so they won’t have to listen. They screw their eyes shut so they won’t have to look, so they won’t have to deal with me face to face and let me heal them.”* It is a somewhat free translation, but you get the point.

So, the use of the means of the parables in this new way is appropriate. It is not necessarily designed to change the situation but respond to it.

The parables here do not discuss how one becomes a disciple, or that such a transfer is impossible, after all the disciples were themselves once “outsiders” – but that natural enlightenment is not enough. It is spiritual enlightenment that needs to be given, but leaves unsaid how and to whom it is given.

The kingdom of heaven for all its growing power is a secret(v11) *“the knowledge about the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you but not to them.”* The mystery of the kingdom of God is only mysterious in the sense that God’s truth comes from revelation not natural insight. It is those who have been given by God to understand the nature of God’s Kingdom brought by Jesus. Parables become hostile to the merely curious but can be grasped by those who have the spiritual capacity to receive them. So, we read in v 34 *“Jesus used parables to tell them all these things to the crowds; he would not say a thing to them without a parable.”* Although we assume parable means a story with a point, in the original meaning it might also include proverbs, riddles, wise sayings. These require thought and careful interpretation.

On the other hand, open teaching is given to the disciples and a lot more of it. So, their spiritual understanding will grow as the mysteries of the kingdom become clear to them. Something for which they were incredibly privileged to be part of *“As for you how fortunate you are! Your eyes to see and your ears to hear I assure you that many prophets and many of God’s people wanted very much to see what you see, but they could not, and to hear what you hear but they did not.” Matt 13:16.*

So, is it a bit strange that parables are not meant to be easily understood? Yet elsewhere in scripture parables needed explaining before they could be understood. In Nathan’s story of a little lamb, told to David, Nathan, - having got David’s attention and his righteous indignation at boiling point - delivered the punch line *“You are the man” (2 Samuel 12:7)*. Parables in themselves are not general illustrations of moral and spiritual truths, which are easy to understand, but to be understood in the light of the person and work of Jesus and the revelation of God. It is only in the recognition of Jesus as Messiah- the Anointed One - of the coming kingdom that is already breaking in. The parables point to similarities, not that it is literally how the kingdom is - a farmer, or a sower, or a fisherman but illustrations to make a point of uncovering some of the mysteries of God which is already here but the outward signs of it presence are very few. **The Kingdom can be rejected and people do reject it.**

With the parable of the weeds, to which we now turn, there is a call to patience. Jesus hearers had their own fixed ideas on the teaching about “the Kingdom of God” as a cataclysmic disruption of society. A revolution. An immediate and absolute division between the “children of light” and the “Children of darkness.” Coupled with this was the new order that would sweep away the old in a purging cleansing flood to become the dominant, victorious reality. The new power in the land based on purity and excluding all the non-children of light. Yet things just carried on as before. So, Jesus tells them a story in v24 *“the Kingdom of God is like this....” That is “This what it is like when God is at work...”*

Now **darnel was a poisonous plant, related to wheat and indistinguishable from it until the ears form**. To sow darnel was an act of revenge, punishable under Roman law. So, it might well have happened in practice as an economic crime on occasion. With a heavy infestation selective weeding is impossible because the roots of the darnel would be entangled with those of the wheat.

The Son of Man, in the explanation in *Matt 13:36-43*, is expanded from not just the sower, but the chief harvester and the owner of the kingdom (*cf Matt 25*) at the end of the age (*v40*). The ultimate turning point when the co-existence of good and evil, wheat and weeds will come to an end. There will be no place for those who *“cause people to sin and all others who do evil things” (v41)*. The weeds or darnel being burnt in the fire is, I suggest, within the context of the parable itself and is not an image of hell in this case but a reference back to *Matthew 8:12 “ But those who should be in the kingdom will be thrown into darkness, where they will cry and grind their teeth.”* So instead of Jewish acceptance that they and they alone would be at God’s party, it is rather those who are there by God’s gift and who have been given that right, not just assumed because of birth right. The belief was that *“no descendant of Abraham could be lost.”* But now instead of this that believing Gentiles might take the place of unbelieving Jews (the incident is the one of the roman centurion asking Jesus to heal his slave and who surprised even Jesus with his faith) and that they instead would themselves

suffer the fate of the ungodly. So, the Kingdom of God in the mission of Jesus was radical indeed. The parable of the weeds was a call for patience rather than a rush to judgment - that would-be God's job.

The Kingdom of God is God's redeeming reign breaking into human history in the person and work of Jesus. Overcoming, delivering, blessing humanity that will be fulfilled at the end. In the meantime, it is not completed. It works secretly without force. It is present, persistent, patient although hidden and unexpected. Yet although it is here society is not uprooted. That is the mystery. We who believe, the children of the Kingdom, receive and experience its blessings but we live in the present age in a mixed society. Seedtime and harvest are both the work of God. The seed has powers resident within it that proves that we are not the ones who place it there and is utterly beyond all that we can do. We can sow the seed but the Kingdom harvest is God's good deed. We can enter it, receive it, look for it, pray for it, we can do things for the sake of the Kingdom, we can tell about it – but only God can give it. It is an act of His will. It can work in us but is never subject to us. It comes as a result of God's new act of Jesus coming into the world.

As the Kingdom comes in as a silent revolution with different origin, the lifestyles of the new community that is being created will, despite the sufferings and difficulties, face a future vindication. Yet it is for God to realise it, not up to us to seize it. Although scarcely distinguishable one day it will be as clearly distinguished as light from dark, night from day.

Yet there is a lot to hate in this parable for religious bigots and Christian nationalists. It is not defended by us. In *John 18:36* Jesus says to Pilate, the representative of the Roman Empire "*My kingdom does not belong to this world, if my kingdom belonged to this world my followers would fight to keep me from my being handed over to the Jewish authorities. No, my kingdom does not belong here.*" Yet there is a clash of Kingdoms where God's Kingdom is full of promise, of the now and not yet. Clothed in humility and meekness. In the death and resurrection of Jesus it is a pointer to one day when the author will walk on to the stage and the play is over and Jesus will come back. The parable of the weeds is an encouragement to keep going, not to give up. The degree the church loses faith in Christ's return is the degree it accommodates and contents itself to be a comfortable part of the world and loses sight of its vision to be the advanced guard of the Kingdom of the new heaven and new earth. The degree to which it loses faith in the Sovereign God. There are the labour pains for redemption not realised. Of the now and not yet. The Church is a sign of the new society, welcoming all races and classes with love, caring for the weakest, standing for justice and righteousness and service. Not selfishness. Followers living among enemies, not separated by fences and walls. Not using coercive power and the politics of polarisation but on a secret hidden power based on God's grace and forgiveness. Of God's reconciling love for sinners.

2 reasons for evil to persist: Where in Jesus' Kingdom outsiders become insiders and weeds can become wheat seeds.