

VPBC Sermon 20 August 2017. The Jesus we never knew x34

The parable of yeast or leaven *Matthew 13:33*. Bread making: **Why is the kingdom so hidden?**

We are in our third of five weeks looking at some of the parables in *Matthew 13*.

Today is the turn of the shortest of parables, one verse, that of “yeast” or better “leaven”- or fermented yeast. **All four of the public parables** told to the crowd (from a boat by Jesus are to those on the nearby beach on the Sea of Galilee) **have been about growth**. The Sower (or perhaps better the parable of the soils), of weeds, of mustard seeds (itself a kind of weed to some) and today is a parable about leaven. Yet the three we have looked at are about how two things seem to be true at the same time (a paradox), The kingdom of God is insignificant with hidden beginnings but will end up in a triumphant climax. They are simple everyday stories used to challenge the lack of credibility in the eyes of some of this announcement of the Kingdom by Jesus as there was little to show for the fact of God’s reign breaking in. While at the same time reining in the expectations and fantasies of the disciples who were impatient to see God’s reign in all its glory and the eradication of the opposition where God’s intervention would be dramatic, decisive and without delay. As *Michael Green* puts it ‘*the way of God is not that of ostentation (showing off) but of ultimate success. Little is great where God is at work.*’

So, although these are simple stories they are not as straightforward as they seem. We have already noted that parables can be quite slippery and you need to think about what Jesus is driving at and not take it at face value. They require revelation from God to really get to the bottom of them and therefore to the mildly curious or fairly disinterested they simply bounce off. Yet they tell us, in Jesus own words, ***the Kingdom of God is like this***. This is what it looks like when God is at work. It is not the same as, it is similar to.

Parables can be a lot more complicated, as we have discovered, than most people give them credit for. They are not sometimes a story with a point, but can have several points. Yet also **where to draw that point in the parable story?** It is not always clear. Furthermore, parts of the parable can contain allegory, hidden meanings, which complicate it further. The other difficulty is that most of us have heard these so many times that we already know what we think it means, and that familiarity can mean we misread and misunderstand what Jesus is driving at. **The parables are for the crowds. Meaning and understanding are for followers, disciples of Jesus, so it is available to us.**

The other thing **parables can be is subversive**. A story that undermines the accepted common-sense way of thinking and acceptance of the way things are done around here. As we are far removed from Jesus original audience and culture we do not always get this, but this story of a woman in her kitchen undertaking a mundane ordinary task

of baking bread was just that. It challenged a great many assumptions held in the crowd by both men and women of what God's kingdom is like, and how it grows.

As an illustration of the subversive powers of stories to challenge accepted ways of 'how things are done around here' is a story of a woman on a bus coming from work. That is pretty mundane. Recently in America there has been a lot of violence and violent comment of what happened in Charlottesville when an 'alt right' supporter drove his car into a crowd and killed a woman. This was an act of terrorism, as we have also tragically seen recently in Las Ramblas and the seaside town of Cambrils in Spain. The arguments over a statute of a dead white general is an argument as to "how things are done around here." The statute in question was put up in 1924 (although the general died in 1870) and was part of the **Jim Crow laws which enshrined the place of segregation in society around racial purity laws.** There is no equivalence, in my understanding of the Gospel, as to some hold this view and others hold that view as regards racism. Racism in God's Kingdom is wrong. Period. Yet that does not stop some Christians and some churches holding and promoting and arguing for racist viewpoints. Sometimes it takes a story to illustrate a truth. On December 1st **after a long day's work at Montgomery Department store Rosa Parks took a seat** in the first of several rows designated for coloured passengers at the back of the bus. It was 1955 and **the Jim Crow segregation laws were in full force in Alabama.** The bus travelled on and filled up with white passengers so that several white passengers were standing in the aisle. The driver stopped the bus and moved the "for coloured's "sign back one full row so they could sit down and asked black passengers to give up their seats for white passengers. If they refused the bus driver could call the police to have them removed. Three people moved. Mrs Rosa Parks did not. When challenged she said, "I don't think I should have to stand up." It was not; Rosa explained later, that she was physically tired but tired of giving in. She was charged, arrested, fined \$10 and with a \$4 court fee. The 381 day Montgomery bus boycott followed. Black churches were burnt, houses bombed but it became the eventual trigger for the repeal of racial segregation known as the Jim Crow laws in 1956 at the US Supreme Court- where they were declared unconstitutional. Nonetheless Rosa lost her job and her husband was fired and unable to find work they moved north to Detroit to start a new life.

This parable too is about a mundane event but it too is deeply subversive and deals with the question where you can change the laws but it does not follow that you can change attitudes to the ways things are done around here. Where does that kind of change come from? **In the growth of the Kingdom it is not just about numbers but depth.** It is as much about inner transformation as outward growth.

Let's us look at the parable in *Matthew 13:33* "**Jesus told them still another parable. The kingdom of heaven is like this. A woman takes some yeast and mixes it with forty litres of flour until the whole batch of dough rises.**"

Now in reading this I am wondering how many people here have actually baked their own bread from scratch. Amanda had a scheme of passing round sour dough yeast, which is similar to the bread making story here, that allowed you to bake your own but also to pass the yeast dough on - **but we ran out of people to give it to as it was prolific.** Another question. How many men have baked bread from scratch? It is slightly more cool now since *Bake Off and Paul Hollywood* which has made baking an acceptable(ish) male task of work. Most of us are supermarket shoppers for bread. I wonder if Jesus had his own bakery it might be called *Kingsmill*? The copywrite, however, is taken. So, for any of you for whom bread making is a slight mystery here is a short video by Fleishman's yeast neatly falling into the stereotypes of a woman at home in the kitchen where "we rise and everybody shines."

Now needless to say when Jesus told this story they did not have access to bread mixers, shiny work tops and purpose-built kitchens. This [clip](#) is bread making in Egypt which is a much more communal affair with laughter chat and gossip as the women work with children all around and one particular child is very keen to get into camera shot. See if you can spot him.

In the parable, the woman uses the time old traditional methods of leaven and wheat flour. For the purpose of the story some of the other ingredients, procedures and stages in production are ignored. The traditional production of leaven, fermented yeast, took place on a daily basis. Some of the fresh dough was set aside to ferment for a day. There were recipe procedures for mixing, kneading, leavening, and shaping the dough, mixing it in a trough and where flour and water were mixed first with then leaven and salt mixed with them. Kneaded dough was allowed to rise or "prove" for a time, normally from night until morning. Then it was shaped on a table and put in an oven or over a pit for baking.

Baking at home was woman's work. Commercial bakers were usually men. How times have (not) changed. It was carried out by freeborn women, freedwomen and slaves of both sexes. It was not considered skilled and was of low social status. The woman here was a domestic worker of modest means occupied in a mundane, unremarkable task. According to Jesus this is what God is like - what his kingdom is like. Unexceptional yet mixed with the extraordinary. God's Kingdom growth is like woman's work in the kitchen. You can imagine how well that went down with the males in the crowd. Worse was to come. Hearers are challenged to expand their understanding of what the reign of God looks like and to think differently about the way God operates. Here the woman is the centre stage of the parable working with the flour to produce bread, part of the story to illustrate how **God's transformational change** breaks into our world. Yet what really makes this controversial is in the comparison of the woman's bread making and the inclusion of yeast. So the reign of God is likened to yeast (**Greek -zume**) that a woman took and "hid" (in the Good News Translation "mixed") in three measures (interpreted as 40 litres) of wheat flour until the whole lot is leavened. This is not a normal bake. The quantities are enough to feed a hundred people.

Now yeast does not have a good press in Judaism. In fact it is surprising that someone who was considered a rabbi or teacher should make a hero out of yeast rather than hunting it down or using it as a warning against corruption. This is what Paul, the former Pharisee, does when warning about behaviour creeping into the Corinthian church. *1 Cor 5* “*you know the saying “A little bit of yeast makes the whole batch of dough rise.” You must remove the old yeast of sin so that you will be entirely pure.*” Yeast as a corrupting influence. But that is not the way Jesus used it here and the way he uses it is disturbing to faithful Jews as an illustration of the Kingdom of God.

For normally, in the way things are done around here, to be part of the people of God is to remove the leaven, the fermented yeast. Particularly at Passover when the Hebrew slaves left Egypt (Exodus 12:15-20) and that it was forbidden to be mixed in the Temple offerings (Leviticus 2:4-5). Indeed, even today the use of ‘chametz’ is strictly forbidden for Orthodox Jews at Passover and the punishment for **eating chametz is “kareth”** or spiritual excision, - one of the most severe levels of punishment in Judaism. It has to be removed from the home (Exodus 12:15) it is forbidden to possess it (Ex 12:19) or eat it or mix it in with other things (Ex 13:3). So, leading up to Passover the days are spent removing all traces of Chametz. Now the leavening agents such as yeast or baking soda are **not** chametz. It is **the fermented grains and they are usually limited to two wheat and three varieties of barley.** This is why it is not so much **the parable of the yeast but of fermented dough**, leavened bread, as yeast on its own is not a problem and in fact is used in wine, which is drunk at Passover and baking soda which is used with matzoh meal.

The chametz is burned, as in this picture her in Jerusalem where people are bringing bread products to be burnt. This done in a formal ceremony called bi’ut to ensure it is destroyed.

So why did Jesus use leaven, fermented grains, as an illustration of God’s Kingdom and why is the Kingdom so hidden? Indeed, what the Good News Bible translates as “mixed” is actually a very unusual word to use in this context. It is not the normal word for bread making. **It is the verb “to hide” or “hid.” To emphasise the secret inconspicuous way that the Kingdom of heaven is taking effect.** The

dough is rising even though its effect at present is small and hidden. As an illustration of that here is a short 14 second [clip](#) to illustrate what happens in two hours as the bread is left to “prove” and the yeast is fermented and it does its work.



So, leaven and leavening were associated with corrupting influence, ritual uncleanness and spoilage. Fermentation. Disgust. Dirt. Something impure, unclean – to be avoided. Something that brings contamination and with that fear and the consequences of crossing acceptable boundaries of decency. Something that needs to be clearly segregated. Here is Jesus saying- the kingdom of God is like this. This is how God works. The Kingdom is likened to a force or process of corruption, uncleanness and spoilage. Leavening is a process of including leaven and wheat flour and corrupting wheat flour into wholly leavened wheat flour. **Similarly, the kingdom involves a leavening of sorts, a corrupting of the people of God through the inclusions of outsiders and subverting the ways things are done around here.**

This is radical, scandalous teaching of Jesus that in the divine realm this is all inclusive and subversive. That takes distasteful characters and transforms them and then transforms society through them. Common uneducated people, women, tax collectors, the sick, the disabled, the poor. It is hidden as these people too are often hidden, in the ordinary but extraordinary work of God. That although it starts small, eventually it works its way through to wholeness. It may only be a small start to begin with but eventually the whole batch of dough becomes leavened.

This illustrates another truth about the Kingdom, where Jesus says in **Luke 17:20, 21** *“Some of the Pharisees asked Jesus when the Kingdom of God would come. His answer was “the Kingdom of God does not come in such a way to be seen. No one will say “look here it is!” or “There it is!” because the Kingdom of God is within you.”* There is, in the kingdom breaking in, seen in the person of Jesus this new emphasis upon righteousness of the heart. The development, through the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit and obedience to Jesus teachings, of character that underlines outward conduct. It is change, hidden on the inside, involving inner attitudes of the will, the choices we make, the way we think. So, we can turn the other cheek. Not long for revenge. An inner renewal where **(Matt 7:17)** *“A healthy tree bears good fruit but a poor tree bears bad fruit.”* An inner hidden renewal enabling change where power becomes available to the person who believes in the kingdom as the future invades the present from the blessings of the age to come. As a new status of being part of the people of God, a child of God, restored and forgiven and in companionship. A sharer in table fellowship with Jesus who says of himself *“I am the bread of life” (John 6:35).* It is from the hidden sowing of righteousness that an ethic of practical love grows over time. You don't buy that off the shelf. It doesn't happen overnight it takes time to prove, to rise but it is transformative. It does rise it will transform but it, although it has power of itself, requires will and action to learn to love neighbour *(Luke 10:29)* and enemy *(Matthew 5:44).* Increasingly this becomes the case until “the whole batch rises.” Conduct becomes a manifestation of character as in *Luke 6:45* *“A good person brings good out of the treasure of good things in his (or her) heart;”*

The growth of the Kingdom is hidden, hidden in the wrong people, hidden by the inner renewing work of the Kingdom that can make truly unclean things clean. It is not

legislation or law making that brings holiness and wholeness but the inner working of God in Christ. Where people learn not to choose evil, but be merciful, to be generous, kind. To be peacemakers rather than hate makers from the inside out. That's how the Kingdom grows. How it ferments, bubbles up, changes, grows and transforms.

To end here is a story from the news wires of last week. It concerns the story of a hidden life, the ferment of the kingdom that from mundane ordinary lives ended up with extraordinary results. It begins with the aftermath from the bombing in World War Two that saw *Ruth Pfau's family* home destroyed and where they barely survived. After her baby brother died in 1948 they decide to leave and escape the Russian sector in 1948 and become refugees settling in Wiesbaden. Later while studying at Manz she came across an elderly Christian who was a survivor from the death camps. It was in meeting her and encountering the hidden yeast of the kingdom that she decided to devote the rest of her life to preaching love and forgiveness. She rejected a proposal for marriage and although baptised in the evangelical tradition converted to Catholicism and became a nun in 1952.

In August of last week, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, *Shahid Abbasi*, announced her death at the age of 87 and that she would be accorded a **state funeral in Pakistan**. The reason this hidden life had such a profound effect on the national life of Pakistan was the result of an ordinary incident of problems over a visa to get into India in 1960 meant she had to stay in Pakistan till it was sorted. It is at that point she visited a leper colony at 30 years of age where she met one of the thousands of Pakistani patients afflicted by the disease.

Pakistan is not an easy place to be a woman, or an easy place to be a Christian, or an easy place to be a Christian woman. Yet she opened a leprosy centre in the Karachi slums which grew to 157 centres that treated tens of thousands of Pakistanis and dealt with the stigma of the disease and enabled hundreds of thousands of people to live with dignity. **Leaven in the dough.** The work of the Kingdom breaking in that for such a difficult country to respond to this work of a quiet, unobtrusive, sowing of righteousness afforded her such recognition and with that the acceptance of her of which she said of God *"when you receive such a calling, you cannot turn it down for it is not you who has made the choice. God has chosen you for himself."*

The wholeness of fermentation of the Kingdom work does not happen overnight. It takes a lived lifetime, to encourage the yeast to rise and transform in the way of God. Perhaps as we consider this, we too need to be open to the challenge that the way things are done around here needs to be reconsidered in the light of God's renewing, changing power that brings ferment, bubbling up in change and transformation that allows the Holy Spirit to go to work on the unfermented parts of our lives. Not just as individuals but as community in community to the difference God makes.