

**Matt 13:44-46. How do people find the kingdom?**

We continue in our short series over August looking in **Matthew 13** in considering **the parables Jesus told of what the Kingdom of heaven is like**, set within our theme for the year “the Jesus we never knew.” We have so far looked at three questions. “Why does evil persist? Why is the kingdom so insignificant?” and last week “Why is the kingdom so hidden?” while looking at the parable of the leaven in bread making.

**So far, the parables we have looked at have been about growth.** How the kingdom grows. It is in response to the increasingly critical approach by the Jewish authorities to Jesus teaching and particularly the apparent mismatch between the scale and the size of its present effects and the gap between that and what claimed of the “Kingdom reign of God “breaking in by Jesus. That there was great expectation of this kingdom coming generally but Jesus was not what they were expecting. Although Jesus had a good deal of celebrity status that could pull in the crowds, the crowds were not really interested in what Jesus was saying to them, or understanding the implications of what Jesus was doing or the significance of what was happening in front of their eyes or under their noses. So, Jesus changes tack and talks to them in parables, which as we have seen, can be a bit slippery and need time, thought and effort to really understand what Jesus was pointing to in telling deceptively simple stories. They are teasers to get you to think. Yet to the disciples Jesus has explained the meaning of two of the parables - that of the sower, or types of soil, and the parable of the weeds - or tares in older versions. He has done this in private. Once, probably, on the boat he was using just offshore on the Lake of Galilee. The other occasion was in a house nearby. They, and we, are given privileged access to understand what Jesus is on about. To his disciples he says (Matt 13:16)

*“ As for you how fortunate you are! Your eyes see and your ears 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.”* Nonetheless, they, like the crowd, had found the parables difficult to follow and to get the point Jesus was driving at and needed it to be explained to them.

**Now with these next two parables, which we look at both together, there is both a change of scene and a change of tone. They both make the same point but have different starting points.**

So, a bit like when you watch the news where there has been the press conference with all the cameras and journalists and public present. Then, after the official shaking of hands and pleasantries, the journalists and public are ushered out and the business carries on behind closed doors in private session where people can talk more freely and matters of substance addressed.

**At this point Jesus** has finished the public session of teaching the crowds from the vantage point of the boat pulled offshore a little way so (given the size of the crowd) they can see and hear him. Presumably as they disperse for dinner Jesus reconvened at the nearby house with his disciples.

Matthew observes (v34) that *“Jesus used parables to tell all these things to the crowds. He would not say a thing to them without using a parable.”* For the reason (v13) *I use parables in talking to them (says Jesus) is that they look, but do not see and they listen but to do not understand.”* Yet Jesus continues to use parables in the privacy of meeting with and teaching his disciples. The next three, of the hidden treasure, the pearl and the dragnet are all in closed session, away from the cameras as it were. *“The knowledge about the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to them (v11)”* and *“the person who has something will be given more; so that he (or she) will have more than enough.”* (v12). As we have noted earlier, **the kingdom is a mystery only in the sense that it requires God to reveal it to us, which he is open to do for all people in all ages.** It is not simply through deduction. It requires, through the Holy Spirit, for it to be revealed and from that a response is required. **It is not enough just to know the facts but to respond to the person of Jesus who embodies and is the entry point of the kingdom of God. It requires us to exercise faith- belief involving taking steps that involve a change.** A change of mind. A change of heart. A change of direction. So why does Jesus continue to use parables with his disciples? With the crowd, it was teasers to test the mind and in how serious they were in really finding out what was going on. With the disciples, those who had committed to already following Jesus – but were not quite sure what they had got themselves into - it was, I suggest, capturing their imagination. Stories help do that.

So, let us look at these two stories, each in turn, **and see what they tell us about, not so much how the kingdom grows but how in becoming followers (disciples of Jesus) the kingdom is found** in the first place and to reinforce what it means to follow Jesus and what persuades us to do so.

**Firstly, the hidden treasure.** *“the Kingdom of heaven is like this. A man happens to find a treasure hidden in a field. He covers it up again, and is so happy that he goes and sells everything he has, and then he goes back and buys that field.”* (Matt 13:44)

**Then the parable of the pearl.** *“also, the kingdom of heaven is like this. A man is looking for fine pearls and when he finds one that is unusually fine he goes and sells everything he has and buys that pearl.”* (Matt 13:45, 46). **What brings these two stories together is that “ he goes and sells everything he has ...”** and we will look at that a bit later.

Firstly, the story of the treasure,(me hearties). **Most of the disciples in that room were not rich and the thought of “striking it lucky” still has appeal and captures the imagination of many today.** After all, “it could be you” as the Big Lottery logo had it. More than one holiday club had the theme of pirates. *Johnny Depp and the Black*

*Pearl* is an invented franchise by *Walt Disney*. *The Pirates of the Caribbean* over three films earned the company \$721 million. *Harrison Ford* in the *Indiana Jones* movies over four films grossed \$906 million. So, no prizes for guessing who found the real treasure out of these stories. Yet *Indiana Jones* was an archaeologist who, despite the dangers, went after lost artefacts to put them in a display case of a museum. That was the fate too of the largest Anglo Saxon hoard found in a **potato field in Staffordshire** with over 3,500 items of gold and silver. The two detectorists who found it in 2009 had previously got so bored with their hobby they had turned to fishing for twenty years. In case you are tempted to head off to your nearest potato field this is treasure trove and belongs to the Queen. Or it did until 1996 when an Act of Parliament now means that you must report it to the local coroner and then offer it for sale to a museum at a price set by the Treasure Valuation Committee. So, it can be a while to wait to get your treasure. Furthermore, one of those who found the hoard said that after a while how boring it got to turn over even more gold coins. They got more pleasure from watching the excitement of the archaeologists at the subsequent dig amazed and delighted by what they had found and the new light it shone on the Anglo-Saxon world

Which raises another problem with treasure. The obsessions with it and particularly “gold lust.” From history, there is the example of the **Conquistadors and Aztec gold**, in fiction there is *Humphrey Bogart* who comes to a sticky end in the *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*- a black and white film of 1948.

**Yet in this story the farm labourer who finds it wasn't actually looking for it. He did not know it was there.** Presumably as he was ploughing the plough hit something hard and when he stopped to take a look, lo and behold there was the treasure. Although there were bankers there were no banks as such. Mattresses were in short supply so valuables were buried and often too in times of war to prevent loss by looting. Nonetheless, some have raised ethical objections to this story. Why did he rebury it? Why did he not share the information and the treasure with the current owner of the field? How hard did he look to find the original owner of the treasure? Why did he keep it for himself? If he was a farm labourer even if he did sell all that he had it wouldn't have been much so practically would he have raised enough money? Yet this is all to miss the point of what the parable is about. The Kingdom of heaven is like.... It is not the same as. **How do people find the kingdom? Jesus is suggesting “by accident** “in the sense that it breaks into our everyday world. The treasure exists. It is hidden but waiting to be found. Yet in finding it is not the same as entering it. It is the response to the finding that is the critical thing. How life changing it is and our response to it. How, in the light of it, **everything else is revalued and it becomes a game changer.**

*Mark 10:47* and *Luke 18:33* tells the story of Blind Bartimaeus near Jericho who up till that point was having a “normal day in the office” begging by the side of the street. Until that is there was a large crowd passing by and he asked the question “What is this?” To be then told “*Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.*” That was it; this is his one chance so he starts to cry out “*Son of David. Take pity on me*” despite repeated attempts by the crowd

to shut him up. When asked the question “*what do you want me to do for you*” by Jesus he knew, like the farm labourer in the parable, exactly what he had to do in response. It was to ask in faith “*I want to see again.*” In *Mark 10:50* we are told he threw off his cloak, jumped up and came to Jesus to ask this of him. His cloak was all he owned. He threw it away in the urgency and the potential of the moment. In *John 9* Jesus takes the initiative in seeing a man born blind and begging in the streets. He heals him with one of his “*I am*” statements included by John (v5) “*while I am in the world, I am the light of the world.*” Yet in the confusion in going to the Pool of Siloam to wash his face, after Jesus had put mud in his eye and told him to wash, he doesn’t get to see Jesus but is hauled off to the Pharisees in the local synagogue to explain the healing. His stubborn defence, of who he only later learned was in fact Jesus, gets him expelled from the synagogue and the safety net of alms and support that would have provided for him. When Jesus meets him again and reveals himself to the man, who can now actually see him, the man kneels down and says, “I believe” in response to Jesus asking him “*Do you believe in the Son of Man?*” Jesus says of them “*I came to this world to judge, so that the blind should see and those who see should become blind.*”

(*Jn 9:39*).

**In both cases those who were blind can now see. What has been hidden up till now is revealed.** In the parable, the earth has hidden the treasure which was suddenly revealed. The labourer knows the value of what has been uncovered and then does something about it. Otherwise the treasure passes him by. It seizes him to act in faith and trust that his world has changed but he has to do something about it. In talking to the disciples, **finding the treasure is not enough, it is what you do with it. It requires a whole hearted, not half-hearted response, which has implications and consequences. So, is it then about to find the kingdom you have to give up everything else in exchange? Your whole previous way of life?** Well, Jesus shows us that God does not love you because you are good. God loves you because God is good. As God would and has given us forgiveness and new life reborn- and if we realise this – we do not so much exchange one thing for another - as we have nothing to bargain with - but we embrace it. We embrace the life of God offered to us in Jesus as the treasure revealed to us. **In order to embrace we need to let go of what we are holding on to.** To open our arms whole heartedly to receive. Yet this can be gradual thing, in the run of the everyday, of what we have come to expect and know but that there does come this point of revelation, and the need for response, amazed by grace. We do not earn this, but it is given to us. Yet it remains a temptation, and a danger, that we can still see this in terms of exchange rather than embrace and being embraced by God’s forgiveness and hope. Peter, on another occasion puts into words what, I suspect, the others were thinking, when he asks of Jesus (*Matt 19:7*) “*look, he said “we have left everything and followed you. What will we have?”* There is the temptation to see what we can get out of this. The buying and selling imagery of the parable might encourage this in the story but it is **not based on exchange of value but the sense of wonder and joy translated as “he is so happy”** in the Good News Translation. It is

joy that has captured his heart. Not happiness. That is the result of happenings but joy that is a gift of God, comes from God and is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

As in 1 Peter 1:8 *“You love him, although you have not seen him, and you believe in him, although you do not now see him. So, you rejoice with a great and glorious joy which words cannot express.”* And that changes everything and puts other things in a different light.

**A small personal story.** When I came back to the UK and picked up the normal strands of everyday life after encountering God in Canada I realised that my heart, interests and affections had profoundly shifted. In my possession was a collection of aviation history books including many British aircraft company histories such as Avro, Handley Page, Boulton Paul, De Havilland, Hawker and some quite rare books including the development of aviation and air routes in Papua New Guinea, which perhaps surprisingly was quite a thick book. I collected them up and took them to a specialist bookshop who were delighted to receive them. The money I received I gave to Missionary Aviation Fellowship. I tell this story simply to illustrate that discovering such treasure meant the desire to let go what I had formally embraced because it was swallowed up in the discovery of the new.

Yet both these stories, and we can turn to that of **the pearl** now, require for any to find the kingdom is the need for a personal response. The story of the treasure in the field was starting from a place of mundane poverty. The treasure of the pearl is from one of wealth and power. This would have been a merchant of means, not a retailer, who had been looking with intent. Someone who had found value in some pearls but this pearl was in a different order all of its own that is “unusually fine.” In response, he does not just sell his other pearls to buy it; he goes and sells everything he has. This, on the face of it, is the less likely part of the story but in both Jesus is making a point as to those who really find the Kingdom find themselves attached to this something or someone of such great over whelming value that everything else in the light of this is overwhelmed.

C.S Lewis was a dusty don from Oxford who struggled for many years with different ideas about God. As a medieval scholar and literary critic (including French love poetry) he took that final step away from “to call one’s soul one’s own” to instead bring God nearer. The final step <sup>1</sup>(p223) **he knew very well when but hardly how**. It was while driving to Whipsnade zoo one sunny morning. **When he set out he did not believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God but by the time he reached the zoo he did**. He wrote a book about it called “Surprised by Joy” and for him after years of searching, and doubt, he had found the pearl of great price.

**So, there are different ways you can find the kingdom.** After long and patient search and where there are other things of value but none compared to this. Yet in these many ways it is immensely worthwhile and it is captured in the imagination of the Jesus story

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1 Lewis C.S *Surprised By Joy* Geoffrey Bles Ltd London 1955

that calculation gives way to extravagant action. **In being willing to give up everything else, not for the purpose of exchange or self-interest, but for joy.**

**Yet whether in discerning this joy in finding and responding to the treasure discovered breaking into our every day, or after long and patient search, it is a joy that is only the first marker on the Jesus story as it unfolds.** It is also marked with suffering where the roots of that joy are found in God discovered in adversity, hardship and difficulty because it is at those times we are held in embrace.

**The kingdom is not about exchange and self-interest and get rich quick but of embrace held by the love of God.** That as we are held in it, 'the things of earth go strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.' It enables us to face fear and anxiety and be extravagant because we are held by grace. God's good love for us enables us the freedom to let go and embrace the way of the kingdom and the Jesus story that has captured our imagination. Of treasure discovered and embraced. Of a pearl discovered and embraced. That changes the world around us and puts it into a new perspective. We find the Kingdom this way, and we are held and continue in it marked by our discovery learning to trust and embrace the new story, the Jesus story, and of the new age to come which has broken into our world and one day will fill all of it.