

## Sermon Trinity 7: July 26th 2020

Romans 8: 38 and 39

'For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present, nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord'.

Mathew 13: 31

'Jesus told the crowd a parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed'.

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In St Matthew's Gospel over the past few weeks we have heard a series of the parables in which Jesus maps out the characteristics of Kingdom of God, or as St Matthew terms it the Kingdom of Heaven. This Sunday we explore a further five parables. The first two use images of mustard seed and yeast. Both describe how from small almost invisible beginnings great things may emerge. In the second group of parables we see God's realm being described as a treasure hidden in a field, something that brings about life-changing joy when it is discovered. We read of the kingdom being likened to a pearl of great price; a thing of great beauty, for which the merchant in the parable will give up all other pearls so he or she may purchase it. The final parable describes the Kingdom of Heaven as being like a great net that catches fish of all kinds, which are then sorted according to their quality, with the good ones being kept safe for the use of the Master and the bad ones being tossed away.

The climax of our reading is when Jesus tells his disciples how to respond to the Good News that he has proclaimed through the parables. He tells them that those who are students of the scriptures, in other words those who study them diligently and become disciples, will bring out treasures both old and new from the storeroom of heaven. What are we to make of all these instructions? How do we sum up Christ's teaching about the Kingdom? What do the parables of this week and over the past two weeks tell us about Christ's Kingdom and why is Christian teaching about the kingdom so important?

By late Old Testament times and in the period between the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and the birth of Christ (some 400 years), we know very little about Israel. What we do know shows a growing dominance of Greek and Roman influences and ideas, and a concomitant nationalistic yearning for divine intervention and independence. For many this crystallized in the expectation of a new leader, a *Messiah* (Greek *Christos* i.e. Christ), one who like the Israelite kings would be anointed by God. Jesus was born into this maelstrom of nationalistic and religious expectations. His message comprises an announcement of the *Kingdom of God* (or Heaven). The kingdom is not to be an earthy kingdom, but an ethical one. Parable after parable addresses the simple question of what is the Kingdom of Heaven really like. Several key strands emerge if we examine all the parables of the kingdom together.

First, Jesus called upon Israel to repent of her nationalist - even racist - ambitions and follow a new vision, this even including love and prayers for enemies. He recognized, secondly,

that Israel's problem was not external, but internal. Sin was at the root cause of her problems. Just as Jesus healed the sick, so Israel required healing from the sins of: inequality; valuing people because of wealth, power and status; and looking for sin everywhere but within the lives of the self-righteous. This explains the apparently harsh teaching he gave to the Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes. It is generally agreed by biblical commentators, that it was this highly *political* edge to his teaching which was one of the principal reasons why Jesus was tried and subsequently crucified. Finally, the values of the kingdom apply in differing contexts. They apply to society and they apply to the individual, for instance 'unless a person is born again he or she cannot enter the kingdom of God' (John 3.3).

Over the centuries there has been much debate over whether the kingdom to which we are called to principally individualistic, or does it apply to society as a whole and whether it relates to the present (i.e. it is *realized* in Christ's teaching), or to the future (i.e. it is *eschatological*) and will be inherited by all or, according to some, only a limited number of believers at the end of time. To enter Christ's peaceable kingdom is faith alone enough as: St. Paul (according to Martin Luther); Luther himself and virtually all conservative evangelicals assert, or are good works also required as enjoined on us by the Epistle of James and many Catholic and liberal writers. Traditionally this has been an issue that has divided Christians, with the Protestant view that faith, the individual and future expectations are all important, being contrasted both with Catholic and Orthodox perspectives on the vital significance of good works and community, and the liberal perspective which holds that the realization of the kingdom lies in Christian ethical conduct.

Today is an exciting time to live as a Christian, because ecumenical scholarship, prayer and reflection have brought about a convergence in opinion at least at the level of academic theology. Its insights are, however, important for all of us and should be shared. It is not a question of present or future, the individual or the corporate, faith or good works and what we do now and what we can expect in the future. All these are important perspectives and the kingdom is not defined by contrasts but summations. It is not 'or' but 'and'. It is about society and individual, it is about present conduct and future expectations. We are called to plant the mustard seed to work bit by bit to further the values of Christ's Kingdom today, but at the same time to recognize that his victory over the powers of this world has been won by his once for all death and resurrection for the sins of the whole world. His kingdom will be realized perfectly in the future.

At a more personal level we are called to work with Christ in the world today, but can have absolute assurance that whatever happens to us, we will be loved by God. Even death itself cannot separate us from this love. Those who strive for the kingdom can look forward to a bright future and, as the *Book of Common Prayer* proclaims, 'in sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life'. All this teaching is summed up in the beautiful words of our text, for me some of the most moving in whole of the New Testament. They are words both of hope and of comfort:-

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present, nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord'.

Amen

David Chester