

Parishes of St Philips and All Saints Kew with St Luke's Kew
Where all God's Children are Welcome

Bible Study for the sixteenth week of the Covid 19 lockdown

Section 3: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Prayer: As Jesus speaks to us, loving God, help us by your Holy Spirit to hear what he has to say, and be enabled to put it into practice. Amen.

Read the passage through twice:

Jesus put before the crowd another parable: "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." He told them another parable: "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. The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 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. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Read the passage through again, out loud if possible

Background

This collection of parables makes up the rest of Chapter 13, after the parable of the sower and its interpretation and the parable of the wheat & the weeds and its interpretation. Matthew has deliberately bunched together a series of parables, possibly from across Jesus's ministry, and is using them as a teaching tool for his community – hence the last section addressed to the disciples about understanding these parables. Whether we agree with his conclusions is up to us!

Some questions

- At last, Matthew has provided his readers with unadorned parables! The mustard seed, the yeast, the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price are all stand-alone parables, free and open for all readers. What do you make of them?
- These are all "the kingdom of heaven is like ..." parables. What does Jesus really mean by "the kingdom of heaven"?
- The mustard seed is not the smallest seed in the world, but probably they hadn't seen foxglove seeds in Israel. Nor does a mustard seed produce a tree – more a shrub, if left to grow unpruned. It can become woody and twisted and full of leaves. So what is Jesus driving at in this parable?
- This parable is diametrically opposed to the parable of the sower – it is about one single seed and what it can become if left to flourish. Who are the beneficiaries?
- There are echoes of one of Jesus's sayings about human worries in the Sermon on the Mount here. But this is like the kingdom of heaven – so how?
- What sort of God provides so much from so little? And doesn't Jesus do the same, in his ministry?
- Now relate the parable of the mustard seed to the Eucharist ... !

- Yeast mixed in flour – that is what the kingdom of heaven is like, according to Jesus. Nothing else? No water, no salt, no kneading, no allowing the dough to rise, no baking? How is this launching the rule of God in the world?
- In Jesus’s time, yeast was kept from one batch of bread making to the next. It is inactive on its own, but transformative in combination with other elements. It also involves effort on the bread maker’s part – it needs to be folded into the mixture and then set to work. It starts off separate and visible, but then becomes invisible as it is incorporated in the dough. How does that describe the kingdom of heaven, or God’s influence in the world?
- We would quite like our actions to be visibly world-changing. Jesus has other ideas. What sort of invisible yet distinct actions can we take that would hasten God’s rule on earth?
- Banks were few and far between in Jesus’s time, so frequently savings or large payments were simply hidden in the ground, which is why so much treasure is still dug up to this day. There is evidence of this in the parable of the Talents.
- The treasure is of greater value than the man’s current assets. That is the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says. How?
- Would you sell everything for the sake of the kingdom of heaven?
- Joy is mentioned in this parable: one of the very few occasions when it is linked with Jesus’s teaching – there is joy in heaven over sinners who repent in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, but little else. The treasure-seeker experiences the joy – is that us or God? Why?
- What is the difference between the parable of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great value? Is it the same description of the kingdom, varied to drive the message home?
- To sell everything and to follow Christ is the mark of a true disciple – there are many who come to Jesus, wanting to follow him, but turn away when they learn the cost. Are we still capable of that?
- Then Matthew falls off the wagon. The parable of the net full of diverse fish is going well, until he latches onto it and chains it to judgement and glory. That is not the kingdom of heaven.
- The kingdom of heaven is a net full of different sorts of fish, some edible, others not. It is not the disposal of the bad fish that is important, but the differentiation between good and bad.
- In God’s just and gentle rule, we shall know the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, good, better and best. Jesus is there to help his followers work their way through the minefield of decision making, of contradiction and opposition, of potential (the mustard seed and the yeast) to the prize (the treasure and the pearl) but at the cost of everything we hold dear.
- Bible Study is exactly the same. To get through fully to what Jesus is calling us to do, we have to spend all that we have in stored up capital of interpretation and pre-set ideas to seize the richness of God’s word with joy.
- In this series of Bible Studies through lockdown, we have steered a very wavy course between the familiar and the foreign, and have never stopped asking questions. As this series now comes to an end, may you never cease to question everything in front of you, so that you may find the true riches of God, the full generosity of his gift to us in creation, in his son Jesus Christ, in the Eucharist and in each other.

Read the passage through again, out loud if possible

Review

What has this passage taught you about

- God?
- Jesus Christ?
- The Church?
- Our current situation?

Prayer: Generous and gracious God, we acknowledge the breadth, length and height of your love for us and your concern for all you have created. Help us to treasure your Word in our hearts and in our minds, that we may always find your pearl of great price and rejoice in all you lavish upon us. Amen.