

SIX PARABLES OF THE REIGN OF GOD

Sermon preached at Christ's Church Cathedral, Hamilton, on the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, 30 July 2023, by Bishop Terry Brown. Texts: Romans 8: 26-39 and Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52.

Have you ever found “a pearl of great price” for which you would sacrifice many other less valuable things? Perhaps a relationship, or a dream house, or a piece of land, or (if a collector) a unique item to add to a collection? I have a friend who is a very serious collector of John Wesley memorabilia. If he deems an item worth collecting, he will go all out to obtain it. From him, I have learned that there are computer programs that will raise your bid to the highest one, just a fraction of a second before the E-bay auction closes. Of course, sometimes these “pearls of great price” are dross, too good to be true, and bring on disasters of one kind or another.

This story of the “pearl of great price” is one of the six short parables of “the kingdom of heaven” in today’s Gospel from Matthew. They cover an amazing variety of contexts. One is in an agricultural setting, the parable of the mustard seed; two are domestic, the woman adding yeast to the bread she is baking and the householder with his family treasury; one is entrepreneurial, the discovery of the treasure buried in a field; one is commercial, the special pearl of great value; and one is about fishing, the bursting net. It is as though any human activity might be a sign of the pervasiveness of the “kingdom of heaven,” if given the chance. They bless the ordinary.

Each parable also has its internal surprises. The parable of the mustard seed contrasts the small size of the seed sown and the large mustard tree that results. But it is not just a parable about growth and a large harvest. The mustard tree provides shelter and even a home for the birds of the air. There is an environmental theme here: that the “kingdom of heaven” is friendly to nature. The farmer does not bother the nests but welcomes the birds. Humanity’s co-existence with nature is highlighted.

The parable of the woman baking bread is striking in that yeast is just plain ordinary yeast, a good addition to bread to make it rise, and the work of the woman baker is commended. So often in scripture, yeast is used in a negative sense of a mold that corrupts, “beware of the yeast of the Scribes and Pharisees”, that must be expunged during the Passover season. Here yeast is a positive addition, like the salt of another parable, and we are commended to be the “yeast” of a community, that gives it good texture, a good taste, producing a pleasant family and community meal. And bread, of course, is a staple.

The parable of the buried treasure is one of those sayings of Jesus that at first seems to commend dishonesty and greed. Someone else has buried the treasure but a different person finds it. He does not try to find the original owner (perhaps the treasure is very old and that is not possible) but rather hides the treasure again and spends all his money to buy the land so

that the treasure will be legally his. He is clever, if not a bit devious. As to the “kingdom of heaven”, perhaps the suggestion is that its value is beyond anything else we have previously known and is worth risk, passion, and sacrifice.

The parable of the pearl of great value has very much the same theme: that the value of the “kingdom of heaven” is beyond anything previously experienced and is worth commitment and sacrifice to obtain. The pearl merchant is competent in his trade; he recognizes a very valuable gem and buys it for himself.

The parable of the full net brought ashore is striking for its addition of some very specific apocalyptic content. Like last week’s Gospel of the wheat and the weeds, a simple parable is turned into an allegory of the apocalyptic day of judgment. My own instincts are to stick to the parable and see the allegory as more an interpretation for Matthew’s fractured and feuding community. The point is that the net is bursting, and it is a good catch. While there are some fish that are undesirable and tossed aside, it is an abundant catch.

The final parable tests the disciples’ understanding of what Jesus has been teaching them. It is one of my favourite parables and I daresay it is possibly the most Anglican of Jesus’s parables: holding on to what is good in the past, that is, good traditions, but also accepting what is good in the new: open to innovation and change. And, of course, the right balance, the Via Media. The parable rejects those who would toss out all that is past, those who reject history and the experience of centuries of Christians before us. But it also rejects diehard traditionalism that refuses to see the positive in change and development.

All of these are, in Matthew’s words, “parables of the kingdom”. They are a variety of human activities, but it does not stop there. They are all told to point to something much bigger, something that is not a human activity but a divine activity: God’s unconditional and graceful loving presence in the world in his Son, Jesus Christ: the incoming of a new divine reign of love and justice in the world.

Human activities and relationships, no matter how much we treasure them, no matter how much we put into them, are still subject to failure and disappointment. Our treasure is not to be “where thieves break in and steal” but on higher divine grounds: a trust that God loves us despite the greatest tragedies and disasters we sometime face; that human relationships and human activities are to be rooted first and foremost in faith in Christ and the incoming divine reign of love and justice. As the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner taught, the most intimate relationship with another human being is through God. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added unto you.” But sometimes added in surprising ways that we do not expect, perhaps not even what we initially wanted. We grow in response to God’s grace.

Each of the parables is about activity rather than passivity: the mustard seed sown then growing, the woman baking bread, the treasure hunter buying real estate, the pearl merchant making a new purchase, the fisherfolk casting nets and sorting fish, and the householder sorting

and using his new and old resources. The suggestion is that our response to being part of the incoming reign of justice and love is **to do** justice and love in our various relationships and activities. That means assessing our various situations, whether personal or institutional, and reflecting on how we can act and do, and then do it.

We may sometimes find the whole enterprise discouraging and want to give up. Paul reminds us in today's Epistle that though we may groan with the pains of the struggle, the Spirit "intercedes [for us] with sighs too deep for words." The Spirit is with us, indeed, within us, encouraging us, pulling us along, through all the travails we face. Paul is writing towards the end of his life; he has been through much and is now facing a violent death. But he is resolute, that no form of human suffering or evil can separate us from God's love, not even death. Sometimes it may take time to reflect, especially after a tragedy, to understand that. Or if we are amidst an ongoing tragedy, it might be wise to step back now and then, to try to discern God's presence in the suffering.

But, finally, what of ordinary life, day-to-day relationships with one another, whether at home, or at work, or in recreation, or even at church? What is the minimal behavioral requirement for being scribes of the kingdom of heaven? We are told to cultivate the gifts of the spirit, especially self-giving Christlike love. Sometimes, though, that advice sounds like a platitude. Perhaps we need stronger language. A friend used to tell me often, "Don't do anything stupid!", a good piece of advice; or the current popular admonition, "Don't be a jerk!" Rather be part of and contribute to the beloved community, accepting and forgiving others. Living in such a way is a fertile ground for seed sown, yeast tucked in, surprising spiritual wealth, great catches and finally a deep divine wisdom that draws both on the past and present. God gives us these gifts and we are and will be abundantly blessed. Thanks be to God.