

NAURC worship 26th July 2020

Welcome to worship

Lighting the candle

The Kingdom of Heaven is like..... Matthew 13.31-33, 44-52

(adapted from a version by Bob Hartman)

Reader 1: "What's the kingdom of heaven like?" Jesus asked the crowd.

"It's like a mustard seed," said Jesus

And then he told them a parable:

"There once was a man who planted a mustard seed - planted it in his field. But even though it was the smallest of all the seeds, it grew into the biggest garden plant - big as a tree. Big enough for the birds to gather and perch on its branches."

Reader 1: "What's the kingdom of heaven like?" Jesus asked the crowd.

"It's like yeast," said Jesus

And then he told them a parable:

"There once was a woman making bread. She took just a little bit of yeast and she mixed it into a great big pile of flour. And it worked its way through all of the dough."

Reader 1: "What's the kingdom of heaven like?" Jesus asked the crowd.

"It's like treasure!" said Jesus

And then he told them a parable:

"There once was a man who found a treasure, hidden in a field. And what did he do? He hid that treasure. He joyfully sold everything he owned. And then he went and bought that field."

Reader 1: "What's the kingdom of heaven like?" Jesus asked the crowd. "It's like a fine pearl"

And then he told them a parable:

"There once was a merchant, looking for fine pearls. And when he found an absolutely exquisite one - one of incredible value - he went away. He sold everything he had. And he bought that beautiful pearl."

Reader 1: "What's the kingdom of heaven like?" Jesus asked the crowd.

"It's like a net"

And then he told them a parable:

"Once there was a fisherman who lowered his net into a lake. He caught all different kinds of fish. When the net was full, he pulled it out and set it on the shore and sorted through the fish. He kept the good ones and threw the bad ones away. And that's how it will be at the end of the age. Like the fisherman, the angels will sort through the wicked and the righteous. And the wicked will be thrown into the fiery furnace - a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Reader 1: And then Jesus asked the crowd, "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

And the crowd answered,

"Yes"

Reader 1: "So what's a teacher of the law like?" Jesus asked the crowd, finally.

"He's like the owner of a house," said Jesus.

And then - you guessed it! - he told them one last parable:

“Once there was an owner of a house. He went into his storeroom. And when he came out, he not only had old treasures, but new ones, too!”

Prayers of approach and confession

Come, bring your mustard seed of hope,
bring your yeast of expectation,
your treasure of thanksgiving.

Bring the pearls that are your prayers,
bring the net of your lives.

Come, you who are called,
you who are loved, redeemed and glorified.

Come, for it is the Lord who calls you.

Gracious God,

we cast out the nets of our worship
into the sea of your Holy Spirit,
that we might draw in your gifts of joy,
peace, thankfulness and love
and be more fully your people to your glory.

Forgive us, loving God,
when we stop looking for treasure
in the storehouse of your word.

Forgive us when we give up the yeast of our faith
and our lives go flat.

Forgive us when the smallness of our lives overwhelms us
and we forget you see our potential.

Forgive us when the focus of our priorities turns us away
from seeking the true secret of life

Forgive us when we don't cast out our nets,
but stay on the shore, complacent and unenthusiastic.

Forgive us, inspire us and renew us in Jesus' name.

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.

Through him our sins are forgiven.

Amen. Thanks be to God.

Hymn Lord of creation

Lord of creation, to you be all praise!
Most mighty your working, most wondrous your ways!
Your glory and greatness no mortal can tell,
and yet in the heart of the humble you dwell.

Lord of all power, I give you my will,
In joyful obedience your tasks to fulfil.
Your bondage is freedom, your service is song;
and, held in your keeping, my weakness is strong.

Lord of all wisdom, I give you my mind,

Rich truth that surpasses my knowledge to find;
What eye has not seen and what ear has not heard
Is taught by your Spirit and shines from your word.

Lord of all bounty, I give you my heart;
I praise and adore you for all you impart,
your love to inspire me, your counsel to guide,
your presence to shield me, whatever betide.

Lord of all being, I give you my all;
if e'er I disown you, I stumble and fall;
but, led in your service your word to obey,
I'll walk in your freedom to the end of the way.

Words: Jack Winslow (1882-1974) altd. In Rejoice and Sing 532

Tune: Slane Music: © 2008 – 2020 Richard Mark Stephen Irwin (b. 1955)

Sermon based on Matthew 13.31-33, 44-52

The Kingdom of Heaven is like.....

My love is like a red, red rose.

As bold as brass.

She's as sweet as candy.

He's as brave as a lion.

Her eyes twinkled like stars.

You'll recognise those most of those phrases as similes – a figure of speech which compares something or someone to something else using the words 'like' or 'as'. We use similes all the time to try and describe the world around us, the people we encounter, the feelings we experience. We could say 'her eyes were blue' and that would convey something about the person, but to say 'her eyes twinkled like the stars' tells us so much more. Even the least poetic and artistic amongst us find that similes come to our aid when we want to use words that explain something that might be difficult to describe. As humans we have been gifted with language that tells stories in a couple of words and paints pictures for us.

In our reading from Matthew's gospel today we heard a number of parables. Apparently, the word 'parable' comes from the Greek that means 'to throw alongside' - in other words, a parable is a kind of extended simile. The purpose of these particular parables is to tell us what the Kingdom of heaven is like. How do you describe something like that? Well, Jesus, skilled teacher and exceptional storyteller, throws alongside these pictures of mustard seed and yeast, treasure in a field and a precious pearl, a net and fisherman. The art of storytelling is being rediscovered in our society today, but it's never really been lost in many cultures – and whilst many oral tales are told to communities just for entertainment, many of them also have a moral or religious or philosophical point – in other words, the storytellers are also teachers – the ones who bring truth and wisdom to the people. In Jesus' day, the scribes were the teachers and interpreters of the law – and no doubt they used stories or parables. There's quite an emphasis on teaching in Matthew's gospel. If we were doing a more in-depth study of the gospel, we would notice that Matthew has arranged his gospel

to emphasise parallels between Jesus and Moses, the great teacher and lawgiver. We shouldn't overlook the last verses of our reading today "So what's a teacher of the law like?" Jesus asked the crowd, finally.

"He's like the owner of a house," said Jesus.

And then - you guessed it! - he told them one last parable:

"Once there was an owner of a house. He went into his storeroom. And when he came out, he not only had old treasures, but new ones, too!"

(verses 51-53). Is Matthew referring to Jesus, or himself, as there is some thinking that the writer of the gospel was a Jewish religious teacher? The scribe, the teacher, is the one who helps the people understand the kingdom of heaven by revealing the ancient wisdom, the old treasures of the law and the prophets, but is also ready to reveal the new treasure, the new wisdom revealed in Jesus himself.

So what are the treasures we can find in this collection of parables? I found a lovely phrase at the beginning of a prayer which says 'The kingdom of heaven slips between the cracks in the meaning of words'. Like many of you, we haven't been on holiday yet, but in other years we have been on holidays where we have seen many drystone walls and the phrase made me think of all the plants, flowers, lichens and bugs you might find in the cracks – but it could also make you think about treasures under old floorboards – things that have slipped beneath the cracks, to be rediscovered years later.

'The kingdom of heaven slips between the cracks in the meaning of words.' What is the kingdom of heaven like? It's like the tiniest mustard seed that grows so big all the birds come to make nests in its branches. It's like yeast that is mixed with three measures of flour that secretly grows and makes the dough rise – so much so that you'll get 50 loaves from that amount. Some of you will have been making bread during lockdown if you could find the flour and yeast! These are parables which point us to the abundant growth of the kingdom of heaven. It's growing in a quiet, even hidden way, but it has dynamic power and will lead to an amazing future.

What is the kingdom of heaven like? It's like treasure buried in a field, which someone unexpectedly found and then hid again, and then sells all he had to buy the field. We've heard a lot in recent years about precious hoards being found - every detectorist's and farmer's dream – and ancient Palestine was fought over many times by powerful empires, so there was always a chance of riches to be found. What is the kingdom of heaven like? It's like a pearl merchant who deliberately searches for and finds the most wonderful perfect precious pearl – this is something he wants to keep and he'll give up everything to be able to own it. These are parables which tell us that seeking and serving the kingdom is about commitment. A cost and sacrifice is involved but everything we give up is worth it, because the kingdom is more precious than anything we own.

What is the kingdom of heaven like? It's like a net cast into the sea, catching fish of every kind – that the fisherman will sort out. This parable is about judgement – we cannot ignore the message and the demands of the kingdom – we need to take it seriously and live by its truth. It really is a matter of life and death.

You've probably heard preachers speaking about some, if not all, of these parables before, and there are various interesting meanings by different commentators. There are also some references on the website if you are interested in visual interpretations. I'm not covering all the different explanations today, but here are a few things to think about.

Firstly – and this is something you may have spotted – Jesus told these parables about scenes from everyday life – here's a farm labourer (working for someone else so maybe not

very well off), a woman making bread (and Jesus was unusual among Jewish teachers in welcoming women into his circle of disciples). And here's a merchant from the bazaar and there's a fisherman by the lakeside. The stories Jesus tells are very visual and draw from ordinary everyday life and his listeners would immediately identify with them. The kingdom of heaven is found here among us – just look and see.

But not only that – you may know about that great storyteller Roald Dahl – Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Matilda, James and the Giant Peach. He also wrote for adults and I wonder if you remember the television series he wrote called 'Tales of the Unexpected'. Dahl's stories often have a twist, humour with an edge, something unexpected – sometimes things that make you uncomfortable.

And these parables are like that too. There's something here to make people laugh – almost in disbelief, something to make them raise their eyebrows, to make them really sit up and take notice.

There's something a bit edgy, a bit subversive, something that might just turn our lives upside down – a bit of a challenge to the religious leaders – and even to the Empire itself.

Take the mustard seed – well, that's a weed – no-one would let it grow to the height of a tree – it's invasive and causes trouble if it takes hold. Oh – the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.....

Or what about yeast – not only is the story about the work of women (that'll raise a few eyebrows) – it's also about yeast – in the days before fridges – this is a live organism which can grow and ferment and yes, that's positive for bread and brewing – but it can also make food go bad so it also has negative associations in the Bible. But Jesus draws out the positive aspects – the kingdom grows with almost explosive force and there is abundance in God's provision. Is that a reference to the feeding of the 5000, to the Sermon on the Mount? 'give us this day our daily bread?'. This is a message for all those who are hungry for the wisdom of the kingdom. And nothing can stop the growth of this kingdom.....

And then there's that farm worker finding and hiding treasure – would he really not tell the owner of the field? Oh, that's a bit questionable, a bit underhand, but the audience quite like the idea that the poor worker gets one over on the rich landowner.

And would that wealthy trader really give up everything? A bit of a chuckle there too – that's not how rich merchants usually behave is it?

And then there's that net and the fishermen – everyone has seen them sorting the fish – but this is a tough world – people are not well off and no one can afford to throw much away – only the worst most inedible fish are thrown away. So – does that mean that in the kingdom of heaven, there's room for all kinds of people – and only the worst of all are discarded. Now there's food for thought for the religious teachers and leaders – what does that say about the exclusivity of certain kinds religious teaching? And hang on – who is it who does the sorting out? Who is the judge in the kingdom of heaven? It's not the religious leaders who say who is in and who is out – it's God, it's God. Sit in the audience on that day and hear those words and you'll hear tales of the unexpected that will amuse and shock and challenge. 'The kingdom of heaven slips between the cracks in the meaning of the words.'

Jesus, the teacher and skilled storyteller, distils the essence of the kingdom of heaven into these witty stories. Small and short tales they might be, but they are full of hidden depths. Grounded in ancient scripture, they reveal new and startling truths and wisdom. Here is treasure old and new for us all. Here are stories to help us when we struggle to keep going

– the kingdom is still growing – perhaps not always in the way that we expect. Here are stories to remind us that the kingdom is open to all, but it requires commitment and persistence.

Jesus asks, ‘Do you understand?’ And when he goes on to speak about the scribe – the one who knows the scriptures and can use it to tell new stories of the kingdom of heaven – who does it refer to? Is it Jesus, or is it Matthew, or is it us? The treasure that we have needs to be brought out from the storehouse and the message shared with the world. Wherever we are – at home, at work, with friends and family, with neighbours, in our villages, towns and cities – in our everyday lives may we help the treasure of the kingdom of heaven shine in the ordinary. It might just change the world.

Prayer

We praise you, Lord Jesus,
for the richness of the parables
that root our faith in the ordinary
and yet transform it and bring heaven to earth.
Increase in us a sense of wonder,
that we might see signs of your kingdom
wherever we are,
and bless us with the words to tell new stories
of your love and grace to all we meet.
We pray in your name. Amen

Hymn We love the Jesus stories

We love the Jesus stories
of what was lost and found,
and how he teaches us to see
God’s kingdom all around.

He tells of hidden treasure,
of sheep and goats and seeds,
of birds that nest in leafy trees,
of corn and wheat and weeds.

We learn of guests and banquets,
of talents and of debts,
of houses built on sand and rock,
and pearls and fishing nets.

He teaches love for others,
that God forgives our sin,
that what we do for those in need
we do it all for him.

Words: David M. Owen in Baptist Praise and Worship

Tune: The holly and the ivy

Music: © 2008 – 2020 Richard Mark Stephen

Irwin (b. 1955)

Prayers of intercession

Lord Jesus Christ,
Words cannot express
how thankful we are that You consider us to be Your children;
Your treasure, Your pearl beyond all price.
Words cannot express
how grateful we are that nothing:
Angels, demons, death, life...
nothing can separate us from Your love!

Lord, we pray this day for all who are yet to hear this news.
May You continue to sustain all who seek to make You known across our world.
Be with missionaries, Bible translators, children and family workers,
chaplains, ministers, preachers and pastors.
Be in conversations and Bible studies,
Be in high churches, café churches, online churches,
messy churches, house groups and cathedrals.
Be in all that opens people's eyes to You,
Your love and Your call.

God of heaven in ordinary,
We pray for those searching
For the precious pearl of purpose in their lives...

We pray for those searching for peace...

We pray for those longing for reconciliation...

We pray for those yearning for freedom...

We pray for those aching for forgiveness...

We pray for those who need acceptance...

We pray for the sick who need healing...

We pray for those longing for comfort....

God of love and compassion,
We pray for all who seek to make a difference in the lives of others.
Be with carers and counsellors, medics and mediators,
Be with those with listening ears and those with caring hands,
Be in all that opens people's eyes to You,
Your love and Your call.

God of justice and peace,
We pray for all who seek to challenge injustices and stand up for what is right.
Be with the politician and the protester,
The activist and the pacifist,
The vocal and the silent.
Be in all that opens people's eyes to You,
Your love and Your call.

Hear us and help us to see You this day, we pray.

Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn **The kingdom of God**

The kingdom of God
is justice and joy,
for Jesus restores
what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory
in Jesus we know,
and here and hereafter
the kingdom shall grow.

The kingdom of God
is mercy and grace,
the prisoners are freed,
the sinners find place,
the outcast are welcomed
God's banquet to share,
and hope is awakened
in place of despair.

The kingdom of God
is challenge and choice,
believe the good news,
repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners
brought Christ to his cross,
our crisis of judgement
for gain or for loss.

God's kingdom is come,
the gift and the goal,
in Jesus begun,
in heaven made whole;
the heirs of the kingdom
shall answer his call,
and all things cry 'Glory!'
to God all in all.

Words: Bryn A. Rees (1911-83) in Rejoice and Sing 200

Tune: Hanover Music: © 2008 – 2020 Richard Mark Stephen Irwin (b. 1955)

The Blessing

May the joy of the kingdom go with you.
May the peace of the kingdom sustain you,
and may you know Jesus Christ, the king,
to be your friend and Saviour
as you journey through this week.
May the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit
be with you this day and always. **Amen.**

You might like to look at the paintings by James B. Janknegt

www.bcArtFarm.com

Look for The Treasurefield: finding and The Treasurefield: Buying and selling, and the painting called A Little Leaven and one called The Net

And If you'd like to see some great pictures about the Merchant and the Pearl, look for the Bible story books by Nick Butterworth and Mick Inkpen next time you're in a library or bookshop.'