

Four Aspects of The Kingdom of Heaven

Today our thoughts are centred on what Jesus has to say on the Kingdom of Heaven. This theme is central to Christ's ministry. If we want to know who Jesus was, and what his mission was all about, then we would do well to study this theme.

The Kingdom of Heaven is found in his great prayer. “Thy will be done on earth as in heaven.” Jesus believed in heaven. He began his prayer – *Our Father in heaven*. Heaven for Christ was a place of perfection, a place where goodness and love reigned. There was no evil, nor pain, nor separation, in heaven. Heaven was, for Jesus, paradise. In fact, he said to the dying thief on the cross when the criminal asked Jesus to remember him in heaven, “Today, you will be with me in paradise.”

At the core of Jesus' ministry was his central and fundamental idea that God's Kingdom was coming upon the world. In fact it had already begun in the coming of the Christ. Jesus was bringing this new Kingdom onto earth, a Kingdom that would grow from a small seed. It would infuse the whole world, and it would be a Kingdom filled with joy. It would become the most wanted thing in people's lives, and it would be offered to all, regardless of age, colour, race or gender. God's Kingdom had come, was coming, and would find its fulfilment when Christ returned again in glory.

So, in Chapter 13 of Matthew's gospel, we discover that Jesus gives us four snapshots of the kingdom of heaven, and I would like to share with you today these four pictures, for us all to gain a better understanding of the mission of Jesus, and to apply it to our own hearts.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

³¹ Jesus told them another parable: “The Kingdom of heaven is like this. A man takes a mustard seed and sows it in his field. ³² It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it grows up, it is the biggest of all plants. It becomes a tree, so that birds come and make their nests in its branches.”

Remember Jesus is speaking to a small group of disciples – a small group that were hard pressed, that were often confused, and were often fearful. Most of the time they didn't really grasp what Jesus was about, or what he was doing, certainly not until after the resurrection.

Jesus planted this idea of a small seed taking root ,and *they* were the small seed and *they* were the ones through whom God was going to grow his church.

It was to start in a very humble way, but Jesus had no doubts that from this small seed of disciples his church would grow to become something big – so big that he uses the illustration that this plant, when full grown, would have the birds of the air rest on its branches. This was a pointer to the church becoming a great and influential kingdom on earth that would bring to this world God's peace amongst nations. Did Jesus really believe that this small fledgling group of disciples would be the start of something remarkable? Well this parable points to this.

On a Tuesday and Thursday morning in our times of fellowship, bible reading and prayer, we spend time considering the world church. We follow an excellent book by OM, which focuses on a country of the day. We are informed about the country and the church within it, and we are always amazed at what God is doing in other lands.

The Church of Jesus Christ is still growing, facing challenges yes, but still this seed is stretching throughout the world. From Japan to Iceland, from Alaska to Australia, we read of Christians meeting together for worship and mission – praise be to God that 2000 years after Jesus spoke these words, the Kingdom of Heaven is still growing and like little mustard seeds, still bearing fruit.

What about us? Here in our church, do we believe that our church can still grow and bear fruit? Or have we had our day? You see, the responsibility is ours, we need to nurture the plant, we need to care for it and to prune where necessary and to give new life in places that growth is possible.

Jesus has not finished with us yet; He is still at work in our midst. Over lockdown, I saw remarkable things happening at Cadder Church. Members of Cadder Church were truly the hands and mouth of Jesus through this difficult time as we cared for each church, as members went out with meals, shopping and encouraging each other through phone calls and messages. You have been part of this and you have shown that the mustard seed has grown and that people have found strength on our branches. May it continue to grow and develop.

The Parable of the Yeast

³³ Jesus told them still another parable: “The Kingdom of heaven is like this. A woman takes some yeast and mixes it with a bushel of flour until the whole batch of dough rises.”

Jesus' Use of Parables

³⁴ Jesus used parables to tell all these things to the crowds; he would not say a thing to them without using a parable.

I'm definitely not a baker and perhaps Jesus wasn't either but he must have watched his mum baking bread, for he uses a parable straight from the kitchen. Jesus is very versatile in the way that he illustrates his stories. Again, he uses images that many folks would have known and loved, and he takes the parable of making bread, and more particularly the use of leaven, to bring life to the bread.

Without leaven the bread becomes a tasteless water biscuit, hard, lifeless, dry, unappetising, but with leaven it becomes soft, porous, spongy, tasty and good to eat. The introduction of the leaven causes a transformation in the dough - and the coming of the kingdom causes a transformation in our lives.

This particular angle into the Kingdom is so important today for us all. The church needs to have leaven. Leaven is the ingredient for every church to go forward. Leaven is the Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, and if Churches don't have the Spirit of Jesus then they are uninteresting, to put it bluntly - boring!

People will be attracted to churches that are alive with the Spirit of Jesus; churches that are reaching out in imaginative and creative ways. Not just the same old things, but looking at ways that we can bring the life and spirit into our communities and our people.

The danger that all churches face, is that they get locked into patterns and systems and ways of doing things that worked well 20, 30 or 40 years ago. But the people who did these things are also 20, 30 or 40 years older and it has the danger of making it difficult for a younger generation to step in and get involved, and to become part of the church. The ones who may bring enthusiasm and life, the leaven to the bread, may well step back and feel that there is no place for them.

Churches today need to consider how to make space for new ideas, new leadership, new creative ways of doing things, and I think this is where Jesus is going with the whole idea of leaven. The old ways of Judaism had failed, tradition had become their God, and rules and regulations were more important than the adventurous Spirit of Mission and outreach. People were safer behind four walls than they were in the market place and the streets, and now Jesus is telling them that, with the coming of the Kingdom, God's Spirit is with them, there will be a new way of doing things.

Did everyone like it? No, they eventually crucified Christ, thinking that his Spirit would die with him.

Well, history tells a different story and the leaven of Christ has worked, is working, and will continue to work throughout his church and his world.

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure

⁴⁴ “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 goes back and buys that field.

The Parable of the Pearl

⁴⁵ “Also, the Kingdom of heaven is like this. A man is looking for fine pearls, ⁴⁶ and when he finds one that is unusually fine, he goes and sells everything he has, and buys that pearl.

From an early age we all love treasure hunts – whether this is in the church grounds at Easter, with the children looking for Easter eggs, or whether it's on a beach with a beachcomber searching for lost coins, or doing an archaeological dig searching for treasures of the past – looking for treasure is exciting in itself. But what to those who find?

Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of heaven as like a person looking for treasure and fine pearls. Things of great value – priceless, and so we learn that the kingdom of heaven is a priceless asset – money cannot buy it. It is something beyond the value of anything in this world.

Isaac Watts wrote a powerful hymn and I'll paraphrase it:

“Even if the whole realm of nature were mine, that would still be too small an offering to give to God, for love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

These words, for me, encapsulate what Jesus is saying about the Kingdom. It goes beyond anything that we can offer to get it. You see there is a paradox here, for the Kingdom of God has already been paid for. It has been paid for by Christ. He has purchased it by his own blood. His cross was the victory, and through the cross his treasure has been given to all humanity. The cross ushered in the Kingdom, and if we want to discover this treasure and this pearl of great price, we discover it through the cross of Jesus.

The treasure to be discovered is at the foot of the cross. For when we go there, and we look up into the face of Christ, again in the words of Isaac Watts, *See!*

*from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down; did ere such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown? And at the moment you realise that Christ has done this for me, there is no sacrifice on earth that we can give to receive this, other than saying *Lord, take my life, let it be, consecrated, glad and free.**

I think this is what Jesus is speaking about. The Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure and a priceless pearl, and those who find it will be filled with joy.

The Parable of the Net

⁴⁷ “Also, the Kingdom of heaven is like this. Some fishermen throw their net out in the lake and catch all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸ When the net is full, they pull it to shore and sit down to divide the fish: the good ones go into the buckets, the worthless ones are thrown away.

⁴⁹ It will be like this at the end of the age: the angels will go out and gather up the evil people from among the good

Finally today, we get our fourth illustration, and this is for fishermen; for all who love to go the riverside, or out in the sea to catch fish. I was brought up in a fishing village, and when I was a boy in Tarbert, Loch Fyne, the fishermen fished in pairs; they were called neighbours, and they fished for herring. I’m sure you have all heard of Loch Fyne Kippers. The sea of Loch Fyne was blessed with the little silver darlings, unfortunately now they are all but gone.

The boats would go out at night. I managed to go out, as an 8-year-old boy, with some of the experienced fishermen on their 40-foot boats. The nets were shot off the boat and trawled along the sea, catching all sorts of fish, and then the two boats worked together hauling the nets and fish on board.

In Jesus' time this method was also used, and I’m sure his disciples would have loved to hear about this parable – you can almost see Peter and John, James and Andrew, smiling as these words come from the gracious lips of Jesus.

That’s what we do every night...Jesus may have replied: this is what your heavenly Father is doing through you now, and the church to come in the future. It will be like a net sweeping the waters and bringing many into the kingdom of heaven.

Friends today, have you been caught? Has the gospel of Jesus swept you up? I know it has for me, and that was some 40 years ago, and I didn’t realise at the time what a dramatic and life changing event it would be for me; literally swept into the kingdom of God.

It has been my life for forty years. A life that I would never have changed. A life that has brought many blessings; challenges, yes, struggles at times. I know that I'm far from perfect, but these are always outweighed by the sheer joy of knowing and trusting in the grace, mercy and love of God, demonstrated to me through his Son Jesus Christ.

When God sweeps us into his net of abundant love, He gives to us his Spirit, the Holy Spirit, which abides in our hearts, and which grows from a small seed to work through the whole person, which will bring great joy and contentment, and one day will come to fulfilment in the Kingdom of Heaven.

My friends, if you are watching this today and you have been swept up into God's Kingdom, get on your knees and give him thanks.

If the net has reached you today, let God lift you up and let him fill you with his Spirit and let him do His work in your life.

It is the most wonderful treasure that you will ever discover, to know God at the foot of the cross, that He has taken your burdens of sin, worry and trouble, and that he will help you and support you, throughout the rest of your life, and that when this world is finished for you, it's only beginning – because you will walk with Him in Paradise, in his Eternal Kingdom.

Come my friends and receive from him afresh today.

Let us pray.