

Date: 28th July 2014, Pentecost 7
Service: Sung Eucharist, Christ Church, Morningside
Readings: 1 Kings 3.5-12; Romans 8.26-39; Matthew 13.31-33, 44-52

Before today's service some of us prayed, in the Vestry, that those worshipping here this morning might catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven. But what does the Kingdom of Heaven look like and if we saw it would we recognize it? In the gospel reading today, Jesus suggests that we might not!

What's the Kingdom of Heaven like? It is, says Jesus, like a tiny mustard seed – so small you can hardly see it yet with the potential to grow so big that birds roost in its branches. Or it's like a little bit of yeast that can leaven three measures of flour – enough bread to feed about 160 people.

Or, to use some topical examples... The Kingdom of Heaven is like a child who goes missing and against stereotype the whole community comes out to search for him. (That the child was already dead is not the point of this illustration – it is that, unexpectedly, the people of Muirhouse taught us something important about what it means to be a community.)

Or the Kingdom of Heaven is like a rich man who buys some Scottish islands and rather than building barricades around them, as rich people so often do, puts them in trust for the whole nation.

In other words, the beginning of the Kingdom offers no prediction of its completion. The Kingdom can creep upon us unexpectedly, it can lead us to suspect one thing only to surprise us with quite another.

What's the Kingdom of Heaven like? It's like a poor man who sells everything in order to buy a field with treasure in it. It's like a business man who sinks all his assets into buying one precious pearl.

It's like a runner, a swimmer, a cyclist, an archer, who puts everything, their whole life and all their energies behind the pursuit of a Commonwealth Games medal.

The Kingdom of Heaven, in other words, offers us such joy, such a treasure, that we're willing to give up everything for it. Not as an act of charity but because our own self-interest demands it.

What's the Kingdom of Heaven like? It's like weeds that grow alongside wheat in a field. When the harvest is gathered, the wheat and the weeds are separated and the weeds are burned. It's like a fishing expedition and bulging net – the catch sorted between the good fish (the edible ones) and the bad.

It's like a Chief Constable who's asked to lead an inquiry into surveillance activities undertaken by another police force, and the discloses the good and condemns the bad practices of that force.

The Kingdom of Heaven, in other words, always has a moral dimension – it implies choice between sheep and goats, edible and inedible, between fresh and rotten fruit, between clean and unclean, good and bad.

And Jesus describes it in these earthy terms – with images familiar to his listeners because the Kingdom of Heaven isn't just what comes in some future world but is here and now – it's part of our normal, everyday experience. As such, it inevitably

has a political dimension too for it shapes our decisions about what matters.

So, how would you describe the Kingdom of Heaven? It wouldn't be surprising if this informed your discussions about the values you believe should shape the future Scotland. 'Acceptance of others, environmental awareness, fairness and justice, integrity, peace, trust, wisdom' – whilst you don't need to believe in God to espouse these values, yet they reflect something of what the Kingdom of Heaven might be like.

And whilst our faith won't lead us to agree on political matters nevertheless, we are those Scribes Jesus speaks of in the gospel reading, who are being trained for the Kingdom of Heaven and who will bring out of our treasures both what is new and what is old. It's our task as disciples of Jesus to reflect on those deeper truths – values, as it were built, into the foundations of how the universe is and how God relates to us, and how God calls us to relate both to each other and the world we inhabit – to cherish what is old, in this sense, yet also to uncover and proclaim how the person and the teachings of Jesus may be encountered in new and unexpected ways. To witness to ways in which tiny seeds grow into great bushes and how people continue to find that the treasure of Jesus, the pearl of great price, is something worth devoting their lives to.

Mind you, it isn't always easy for us, the church, to keep this sense of constant renewal at the front of our minds. Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk,¹ indeed, suggest that church communities are far more likely to opt for old ways rather than opening themselves to the new. This may have worked for much of the twentieth century when society was fairly stable, values were shared and communities settled. Churches knew how to be church and decline could be met by tried and tested

methods – refreshment of worship, new learning programmes, even change of leadership and so on. Yet even now, in a rapidly changing world of cultural and religious diversity, unsettled communities and a variety of threats to our way of life (both perceived and real), previously successful churches try to revert to patterns of behaviour that worked for them before and become confused, depressed and even angry when they don't work.

Roxburgh and Romanuk say that in their experience congregations need to recognize the changed world they live in, be honest about their fears and bring all this into an intimate dialogue with Scripture. Inhabiting old truths so that new truths, new treasures, may emerge as the church listens to what the Spirit is saying. Ultimately, they say, this leads us towards an 'emergent' church life, Christian communities which are vigorous, innovative, unafraid of failure and experiment because they are secure in their sense of identity as those called by Christ into active discipleship.

In other words, the challenge is to be faithful disciples in the context of our present moment and surrounding culture, not in a context that existed, 20, 50 or even 10 years ago. And our faithfulness here will be judged not by whether our numbers are growing or whether we have plenty of money in the bank, but on whether we are a training ground for the Kingdom of Heaven. Are we the kind of community that's prepared to embark on small beginnings, recognizing that whilst some may achieve spectacular results most will not? Are we a community in which people are learning to offer their whole selves for the pearl of great price? And when the time comes for sorting, for appraisal and review, are we able to recognize in our life, wheat as well as weeds, good fish as well as bad, fresh fruit of the Spirit as well as rotten failures?

What's the Kingdom of Heaven like? Might it look a little like Christ Church, Morningside?

As the story of Solomon shows us, in part this comes from learning to pray for the right things. He prayed not for riches or long life but for wisdom. As St Paul says, we often don't know how to pray or what to pray for and we rely on the Spirit to pray for us. But I suspect that we are to pray not for the rekindling of past glories and a golden age that may or may not have existed, nor for a triumphant or triumphalist church, or even one full to overflowing, but that we may be trained for the Kingdom of Heaven. To pray that, by God's grace, we may discover how the old is being made new, how the message of Jesus speaks still to our changing and sometimes frightening world and what it means to say that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

+John

¹ Alan J Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader, Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2006. This is a much simplified summary of some of the points the authors make in their book.