

Year A Proper 17, 26th July 2026

1 Kings 3:5-12; Psalm 119:129-136; Romans 8:26-39;
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

We've all had the experience of waiting for ages for a particular bus and suddenly two or three of them come along together. It feels like that with today's Gospel, where in just 12 verses Matthew manages to pack in five of Jesus' parables.

Why couldn't Matthew have spread them out a bit more evenly through the Gospel. Yes, they're all about the Kingdom of God, but then all parables are about the Kingdom of God.

Tom Wright argues persuasively that Matthew, in the way he shapes his Gospel, sets it in the context of the old and the familiar world of Israel and its history, yet at the same time the content is very new and sometimes unsettling. It's a bit like moving house isn't it? Familiar furniture and pictures surround us, yet somehow they seem different and even new because they are set in a different context.

Let's take the first two, the parable of the mustard seed and of the leaven hidden in the bread. At a time when the Church is retrenching rapidly in the Western world, it's hard to believe that the kingdom of God is flourishing. Yet what Jesus is saying is that much of what is happening in the kingdom is hidden, that that is God's way of doing things.

I wonder if the missionaries who went to Africa more than a century ago to share Good News could ever have imagined

that the roles would now be reversed with missionaries coming to us because that is where the Gospel needs to be heard, that the mustard seed those missionaries planted all those years ago has exploded into life, spreading like an invasive weed.

Now I'm not sure that mustard seeds are grown much here in the United Kingdom, so perhaps for us a more meaningful image would be a colourful ivy. Planted against the wall of house, it is at first insignificant, yet, suddenly, it's covering the whole side of the house – a haven for insects and small birds.

Or take leaven, which Jesus describes as hidden in the dough. To his audience of course, leaven was regarded as unclean or even evil. Unlike the convenience of dried yeast, in those days you had to let the leaven rot sufficiently to make the next batch. Again, like the mustard seed, it does its work unseen – until suddenly you have a nice risen loaf, that serves its purpose, just like the mustard seed.

The kingdom starts, Jesus says, with small beginnings and time is needed to see the full effects, but we will see them. Take the abolition of slavery in Britain – that started with the efforts of one man, William Wilberforce. A committed Christian, Wilberforce took up the cause of the abolition of slavery in his late 20s. Three days before he died at the age of almost 74 he heard that the legislation to abolish slavery in most of the British Empire had finally got through Parliament.

I'm sure in your own lives you can think back to something you have said or done as a Christian that has perhaps lain dormant for years but has suddenly sprung into life.

The parable of the hidden treasure and the pearl sit together and are perhaps the most challenging for us. In the first instance, someone finds the treasure and then buries it in a field and sells everything he has so that he can buy the field and dig up the treasure to claim it for himself. In the second instance, the trader knows what he is looking for and waits until he finds it and then goes and sells everything he has to buy the pearl.

The immediate point of both parables is the two men went all-in to buy something they regarded as almost beyond price, even if their families, neighbours and friends thought they were barking mad. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like, says Jesus. And the question he is asking each of us is Are you all-in? Do you believe that the Kingdom is worth having, even if it costs you everything.

The Genesis reading, which is the alternative reading for this week, is interesting in that context. It's the story of how Laban tricks Jacob into marrying Leah, the ugly sister as it were, when he actually wanted to marry Rachel.

Strip out the patriarchal and polygamous nature of society in Jacob's time and Laban's deceit, which is, amusingly, a case of the biter bit as far as Jacob is concerned, and at its root it is a story of how Jacob goes all-in to have Rachel as his wife. He's

already spent seven years working for his future father-in-law and suddenly finds himself married to the wrong woman, and rather than storming off in a huff accepts another seven years hard labour because he still thinks the prize is well worth it. So it is with the Kingdom.

Today's reading from 1 Kings has Solomon asking God for wisdom as his top need if he was to rule Israel well. God is so pleased that he promises to give him riches as well. I doubt if God would have responded the same way if Solomon's top priority had been to get rich. The point is that if our heart is right then God will bless us in all sorts of ways we can't imagine or expect. Isn't that worth going all-in for?

I've said in another context that Jesus tells us that God is actually pleased to give us the Kingdom, another reason to go all-in. And that also ties in with that wonderful passage from Romans that Helen read for us, where Paul, who definitely went all-in, says nothing, absolutely nothing, not even our own mistakes and bad behaviour can separate us from the love of God. There is nothing we can do either to make God love us more than he already does or to love us less.

And he also reminds us that God works for the good of those who love him, and because of all that, Paul says, we are more than conquerors. Isn't that alone worth going all-in for?

Of course even if we are more than conquerors it doesn't mean that all our problems will magically disappear, and it

also doesn't mean that the Kingdom will necessarily look like we think it should look like.

The final parable has Jesus comparing the kingdom to a catch of fish, where good and bad are caught alike and where the sorting is done by once the catch has been landed on shore.

Its counterpart is the parable in last week's Gospel about the wheat and the weeds. Granted the weeds were planted by an enemy of the farmer, but, Jesus says, the labourers are not to throw out the weeds as soon as they appear, but rather what was weed and what was wheat would be decided at the time of harvest by the reapers.

Markie and I went to Guildford Cathedral about three years ago and the preacher told a wonderful story relating to that. A Protestant in Northern Ireland got to know a Catholic priest quite well, and the priest invited him to go to his church for Mass.

The church was packed and the Protestant, the only one there apparently, sat at the back and stayed in his seat when it came to taking communion because he knew it would be considered inappropriate for him to do so that in that setting and he did not want to embarrass the priest. But the priest saw him sitting there and chose to walk the length of the church to give him communion – having decided that it wasn't for him to decide who was wheat and who was weed. A lesson for us all in all sorts of church contexts, I think.

Interestingly, all these parables, apart from the last one, have one common theme – waiting. The kingdom of God is absolutely worth waiting for, in fact it is worth everything. We have to trust that God is active in building his kingdom even when much of that activity is hidden and out sight. Not only that, we need to accept that the harvest will be ready when God says it is and not when we think it should be. His timing is not our timing.

Rather, our job is to think how we can plant our equivalent of the mustard seed, how we can leaven the dough as our contribution to growing the kingdom.

The similes used by Jesus reflected his audience – farmers, fishermen, gardeners, housewives, labourers and traders – and I doubt he would use the same sort of similes today.

So I want to finish by leaving you with a challenge to consider over the next few days which is what the Kingdom of Heaven means in your context and life experience. In other words, echoing Jesus's words, The Kingdom of Heaven is like.....

Amen