

# Similes for the Kingdom of Heaven

Sermon for Trinity 7 from Bishop Jo

[Romans 8.26-39](#)

[Matthew 13.31-33,44-52](#)

31 Jesus put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup>it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'

33 He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

44 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.'

45 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; <sup>46</sup>on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.'

47 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; <sup>48</sup>when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. <sup>49</sup>So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup>and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

51 'Have you understood all this?' They answered, 'Yes.' <sup>52</sup>And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'

"When you are a Bear of Very Little Brain, and you Think of Things, you find sometimes that a Thing which seemed very Thingish inside you is quite different when it gets out into the open and has other people looking at it." So wrote A.A. Milne of Winnie the Pooh.

A bit of me wonders if Jesus knew we humans were beings of very little brain. And that a thing that is wholly thingish, completely given, to someone who came from heaven is quite different and often incomprehensible when viewed by earthlings. The problem is we don't easily get it. And so Jesus talks in parables – and some parables are only a sentence in length, more of a simile than a story.

And so to Jesus' description of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is very eager to help us to engage with what the kingdom of heaven is like, yet it takes quite a few goes. And today in Matthew 13 we have quite a collection of attempts, angles, to help us get some handles on what the kingdom of heaven is like. It's like lots of things, quite simple things really, yet clearly it takes a whole number of approaches and images and descriptors for us to begin to grasp it or explain it or imagine it.

What is the kingdom of heaven like? It's like a mustard seed which someone planted, the smallest of seeds that grows into the biggest of bushes. It's like yeast that a woman took and mixed with a load of flour which leavened the whole lot. It's like treasure, which someone finds and hides, and then sells everything to buy. It's like a merchant looking for fine pearls who, on finding the finest, is willing to sell everything else to buy it. It's like a fishing net that catches a ton of fish, even though some of it is good and some of it bad. I imagine Jesus could have gone on with more similes, more simple pictures through which we might further glimpse facets of the kingdom of heaven.

In one sense, you might say it's like nothing else. In another sense, it's like all manner of common experiences. Today I want to explore some of the features that this collection of similes has in common.

Each of them starts with some aspect of God's creation, something that humans have had no part in creating yet with which we commonly engage. Clearly the kingdom of heaven begins with us recognising the grace of God in what is already there, quite apart from us – in the varying spheres of agriculture, of the kitchen, of trade, at sea. Yet that gift of creation becomes coupled with some aspect of human endeavour – it changes because of our labour, our work. So, there is something that does not originate with us, something our earth offers that is purely the fruit of our Creator – seeds, yeast, treasure, pearls, fish – yet which when nurtured by our own efforts (of sowing, cooking, buying, selling, fishing) becomes something abundant and much more significant. Through our various roles it comes to be more like the kingdom of heaven but it does not begin with anything we do – it begins with some raw materials that are simply there, that we're given. So I dare to suggest you might improvise and imagine some further similes for the kingdom of heaven along similar principles, perhaps related to your line of work or engagement. The kingdom of God is like a pattern that someone drew... like a child that someone raised... like a country that someone visited... like coffee that someone harvested and brewed... like a courtyard in which someone danced... like some stones someone found and designed a bridge... I don't know... like a puppy that someone trained...

Now, I want to dig a little deeper into these similes to understand what God might be up to in his exercise of kingship, in the domain of the heavenly realms. We've started with the *what* of the kingdom of heaven. Now to the *where*. We might imagine the kingdom of heaven to be all about God, but Jesus voices something fundamental about how God works. God chooses to work with and through human vessels. And so there is a relationship between heaven and earth, a working relationship between the divine and the human. The kingdom of heaven is not just about heaven, but about earth too. Indeed it takes place here, among us. It's about the transformation of the earth, the world that we know, here and now. It's not about some kind of translation that takes us away from the 'stuff' of life as we know it – it happens right here in the messy space where we live.

And then to the 'who' – to that partnership, the working relationship whereby God and humanity are both at play. Let's be clear God could work perfectly well – actually, far more efficiently – without us, but God chooses to work with us and through us. God does not need us to fulfil any purposes, yet God invites partnership and that partnership is real. Partnership that is real involves mutuality and interdependence. That means, if we fail to sow seed, the seed may fail to grow. If we fail to put the yeast in the dough, the leaven will not take place, if we don't cast a net, the fish will never be caught. God elects to take the risk of collaboration. Why would God do that? For the sake of relationship. Real relationship. Which means we become partners – yes partners in the business sense, like partners in a law firm or a GP surgery, where there's shared ownership and investment and responsibility and reward. Let's not pretend we're equal partners. The kingdom of heaven could surely happen without us, but Jesus describes how God chooses only to do it *with us*. God chooses to tango.

So we've looked at the *what* of the kingdom of heaven, and the *where* of the kingdom of heaven, and the *who* of the kingdom of heaven. Finally I want to talk about the *how* of the kingdom of heaven. You will understand from Romans, I'm sure, that we're justified by faith and not by works; yet the kingdom of heaven happens when God's people invest. It's not just that God doesn't do it alone; it's also that God gives us meaningful work to do, God embraces our gifts and graces, God uses our skills to plant or bake or trade or discern or fish. God engages us in work so that we're invested. God gives us responsibility. We're not passive onlookers watching our mighty God scoring

all the goals: God passes us the ball, we're engaged participants. We're not just invited but expected to play ball. And that engagement is fundamental to the outcome, to the finds, to the fruit, to the fulfilment.

On the one hand you might just call this the logic of cause and effect. Because we're giving to the game, we share the results. Effort in, reward out. But on the other hand the magnitude of the outcome bears little relation to the magnitude of the input. What begins in scarcity ends in abundance – just as with the miraculous catch of fish when Peter had been out there trying all day. Or the overwhelming flow of fine wine when the wedding guests thought they'd run dry. Or the baskets of food leftover – when there was only a small boy's picnic for five thousand.

The kingdom of heaven begins with grace; it continues with partnership; and it ends with surprise, and joy, in overwhelming disproportion.

But there's a final thing I want to point out and I think it's vital. It demands – or at least it assumes – that we're not just 'in' but 'all in'. On the one hand the parables invites us to put ourselves in the role of the sower and the bread-maker and particularly the treasure hunter and the merchant: and note that these people risk everything. They put in their efforts freely and wholeheartedly, risking that their efforts could be wasted but finding instead the reward is all consuming. The kingdom of heaven is an invitation that's not partial – not one foot in one foot out but both feet in for the hokey cokey.

And on the other hand the parables are open to looking at it the other way around. Suppose the merchant is God in Christ who has been searching for you, for all his life, since before your creation. You are that work of grace, the finest treasure who is found by that merchant. And on finding you, is willing to sell everything, to give everything, even his life, to win you, to capture you, to situate you within the kingdom of heaven. Yes, the kingdom of heaven is about risk but it's also about realisation: realising how precious we are to God, as well as realising our role with God.

Isn't that mind-boggling for we bears of little brain! I wonder if we can ever comprehend the dimensions of the kingdom of heaven – the what, where, who and how. But if we can jump in with both feet and risk our all, it seems we just might have begun!