

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 36”

Matthew 13:31-35

More parables from Jesus this morning. As Matthew points out in v34, this now seems to be Jesus' preferred method of teaching and, quoting from *Psalm 78*, he sees this as yet more proof that Jesus is fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament with regard to the promised Messiah. And, as we saw last time we looked at this chapter of Matthew's account of the life and teaching of Jesus, it's another parable used by Jesus to say something about the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God.

Jesus has arrived to bring the Good News of the Kingdom of God. He has come telling people that he's here to inaugurate this wonderful sovereign rule of God which was promised by the Hebrew prophets and preachers, the time when things would start to resemble the world that God had originally intended. This Kingdom would see injustices put right, evil overcome, relationships restored, diseases healed, nations at peace and people living in harmony with one another and with God. He's talked about it in his parables and encouraged people to live in the light of it in his Sermon On The Mount. What's more, he's started to show people what it might be like to live in such a Kingdom as he has brought healing and hope to those who were struggling with disease and despair, and he has challenged the vested interests of the temporally powerful, who thought that the Kingdom was their own construct.

But once again, Jesus must have been aware of people who were wondering just when this Kingdom was going to be fully realised. And two thousand years on we are still wondering when it's all going to happen – indeed, sometimes we even wonder if it's going to happen at all. It's very frustrating, living in a world which seems to be just as messed up as ever and trying to convince people that it's all going to turn out OK just because Jesus has said so. Where is the hoped for Kingdom of justice and joy? As Elton John sang back in the 1970s, *“If there's a God in heaven, what's he waiting for?”*

Martin Goldsmith, the academic and Bible teacher, became a Christian from a Jewish background and in his comments on this passage from that perspective he says, *“The Jews were expecting the Messianic Kingdom to burst suddenly and victoriously onto the scene of history, but Jesus goes against that belief.”* They wanted the Kingdom to get going. They recalled the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament, the passages which said that their enemies were going to be wiped out, that their lives were going to be transformed and their situation improved beyond measure, that justice would be done and righteousness would rule. They knew that a Messiah would come and sort it all out. And here's Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, the answer to their prayers, the object of their expectations – Jesus, who has come proclaiming that the Kingdom is now among them – but nothing much seems to be happening. Where is this Kingdom? Why is it not happening?

And we often feel the same, I imagine. Every now and then we have an upsurge of triumphalism and go off marching round the streets singing our songs and banishing the devil and all his works, believing that we're on the verge of something amazing as the Kingdom becomes established in our land. But nothing seems to change. The powers that be are still exercising power. Injustice is still obvious all around us. Life is still a struggle for most people. What's going on?

Well, Jesus tells another couple of parables about the Kingdom, two more little insights into what's going on. This time he doesn't explain his stories, as he has done with the stories of the soils and the weeds. But he still uses a couple of very commonplace things to try and make his point. Firstly, he talks about the mustard seed. He says it is the smallest of the seeds that they plant: it's maybe not the very smallest, but it is small. In fact, it was used proverbially as the smallest seed. The Jewish people of the time would use phrases such as *“as small as a mustard seed”* to refer to something that was very, very small. And it didn't necessarily grow into the biggest tree in the garden. It certainly grew into a pretty big shrub, sometimes up to 4 metres high – certainly a plant plenty large enough for birds to sit in its branches. The point Jesus seems to be making is not to do with the actual sizes of the seed and the bush, but the contrast between them.

Then he talks about yeast. With the exception of this story – and the parallels to it in Mark’s and Luke’s Gospels – every time yeast is mentioned in the New Testament, it’s used to illustrate the influence of evil. But here, Jesus seems to be linking it with something good. Once again, though, the point is not in the actual properties of the object, but in the process that is going on. Yeast is again very small. But it can have a huge influence. It works unseen and mainly unnoticed through all the flour. Different people suggest different amounts of flour here and say that this would have fed anything from a large family to a hundred people. The specifics are again not important: it’s just clear that this was a lot of flour to be raised by a very small amount of yeast. So Jesus is using these two little parables to make a couple of important points about the Kingdom, things that he hoped would encourage his listeners and which can encourage and challenge us still today.

1. GROWTH

The first point he seems to be making is that the Kingdom will grow. But it will grow gradually – as a tree grows – from very small beginnings. Remember that it began with the birth of Jesus, which took place with very little ceremony, almost completely overlooked at the time. And even after the songs of the angels and the search of the wise men, Jesus seems to fade back into complete obscurity for the best part of thirty years. And then, when Jesus did finally start to fulfil his mission, it was just him and few raggle-taggle misfits who went around talking about it – and the raggle-taggle misfits didn’t really know what they were talking about most of the time anyway.

But, says Jesus, it’s going to grow. Just as a little mustard seed grows slowly and surely, but without anyone actually being able to watch it grow (this as, after all, in the days before time lapse photography), so the Kingdom will expand and spread. Don’t worry that it’s not huge yet. George Buttrick, the American preacher whom we quoted last time, talks about our being “*victimised by bigness*”. We don’t feel anything is any good unless it’s big. And we find ourselves in churches playing the numbers game, too. How big are we? How many people do we attract? Because, so our logic goes, if we’re not big, we’re not really any good.

Jesus is saying that we needn’t worry. It’s going to happen in the end. The Kingdom is gradually growing – as we can see in some other parts of the world at the moment where the influence of Christianity is very much in the ascendant – and one day it will, indeed, be so large that others come and benefit from it too. The image of birds coming and perching in a tree is used several times in the Old Testament as an illustration of empires which drew others in. (You can see it in, for example, *Judges 9:15; Ezekiel 17:22ff, 31:3-14; Daniel 4:7-23.*) But don’t expect it to happen overnight. You can’t usher it in with a couple of noisy marches – or even a few weeks of concerted prayer. It will take time and it will need continuing prayer and constant watchfulness on the part of those who are already part of it. Tom Sine wrote a book called *Mustard Seed vs McWorld* about the effect of the little pockets of Kingdom activity on the seemingly overwhelmingly large institutions and empires of this world. And it built on his earlier book *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy*. Which really takes us into the second point Jesus is making.

2. INFLUENCE

That quiet, gradual, inexorable growth happens because of the effect of the yeast-like properties of Kingdom values and the people who display them. The yeast works through the whole batch, slowly but surely. If God’s people, the followers of the Kingly Messiah are fulfilling their calling, then they, too, will be working slowly but surely to bring about the expansion of the Kingdom in this world. God’s people – you and I – should be having an influence on our little part of this world.

Yes, it’s great to have great missions – campaigns and crusades, as we used to call them – and to have great preachers speaking to thousands. Yes, it’s good to have projects and programmes and high-profile people making a lot of noise about Christianity, about the Kingdom and all that we believe it entails. Those things certainly have their place, and many of us would not be here today were it not for those expressions of the Kingdom. (I certainly wouldn’t.) But what Jesus is talking about here is the influence of God’s people – ordinary, faithful, prayerful, committed people who can quietly but effectively model

the values and attitudes of the Kingdom where God has called them to be. This is once again about living out what you believe on your daily frontline. This is what I like to call “*Evangelism by subversion*”.

We are not called to withdraw from our society and our culture. A very, very few people might have that vocation of prayer and solitude – and we are, no doubt, very grateful for those who devote themselves to prayer on our behalf in abbeys and monasteries. The vast majority of us are not called to go and work in another culture or society – and, again, we are grateful for those who do accept the calling to go and take the gospel message to other countries. But most of us are simply called to live here, in and around Lichfield – and the places to which we commute during the week – and show by our own faithfulness to the teaching of Jesus just what that Kingdom can look like. We are called to infiltrate this great godless lump of dough with the yeast of the Kingdom. It’s not done with any great razzamatazz or fanfare, but quietly and confidently with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Just last month the good old National Secular Society produced a report entitled *Evangelism In State Schools*, which waxed hysterical about the undue influence Christian groups are having in state-run schools – so we must be doing something right! It uses words and phrases such as “infiltrate” and “incursion” and accuses teachers of naivety in allowing such subversive groups into schools. Now, my experience is limited, I know, but I don’t think it’s unrepresentative. But look at The Lichfield Christian Schools Work Trust, The Gideons, Youth For Christ (according to the report, one of the most dangerous organisations to be let loose on our children) – they just go and get on with stuff in schools, teaching values, sharing beliefs, reminding students of the rich tradition of biblical literature: acting as yeast in the dough.

But you don’t have to be a part of a Christian group that goes into schools to act like yeast in our community. You simply need to live faithfully according to the teaching of Jesus, according to what we read in the pages of the Bible. And when there are opportunities, you can speak sincerely and gently about what you believe – and about the transformation that has taken place in your own life. Live your life with that renewed mindset of which Paul writes in *Romans 12:2*. Ensure that your attitudes and values are those which Jesus teaches and models in his own life.

I doubt very much whether – even if we all did that faithfully and continuously – we would suddenly see the Kingdom fulfilled and the New Jerusalem established by the end of the week. But we would be making our small contribution to the quiet, gradual and inexorable advance of the Kingdom, which we do believe will one day come to pass. Be encouraged by Jesus’ words – it’s going to happen one day. And be inspired by Jesus’ example – not only in his life and work here on earth, but in his sacrificial death on the cross for each and every one of us (which we will be remembering in a few moments), and in his triumphant resurrection and ascension, which really set the seal on God’s promise that things will work out as he wants. Get out there and be yeast!

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Questions for discussion

1. Why are we so often preoccupied with size and numbers? Do you find it discouraging if there are only a few people in a church or if there don't seem to be many Christians about? Why/why not?
2. How can we as a church and as individuals act as yeast in our community? Try to think of some specific examples.
3. What signs of the growth of the Kingdom of God can you identify in our community? Do you think other people associate them with the work of Christians or not?
4. Complete this sentence with an example of your own: *"The Kingdom of heaven is like ..."*