

The Kingdom of Heaven is like...

Who are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi?

They're the books grouped together at the end of the Old Testament. Collectively, these twelve books are often referred to as the Minor Prophets. In the Jewish tradition, these twelve books are small enough to group together on one scroll.

The term 'minor prophets' was apparently coined by St Augustine, although coined in Latin as 'prophetae minores' – and he did so to distinguish them from the much larger books of the major prophets - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

The minor prophets are not less important than the major prophets. It's just that they're smaller – and as a result we generally encounter them less often, whether we're reading through the bible, or following the lectionary readings as we tend to do in church.

But the minor prophets are part of the scriptures, part of the inspired word of God, and we learn from them. And we do know some of them, too - where would church signs across the world be without Micah's "...what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."?

As we turn to our gospel reading today, I think we find something similar. We have a group of parables to consider, but they're not the major parables. I think if I was to challenge you to write a list of Jesus' parables, the first one would probably be the Good Samaritan, and if it wasn't the Good Samaritan it would be the Prodigal Son. After those two, there would be a whole bunch of others – the parables of the sower, the lost sheep, the workers in the vineyard, the wise and foolish virgins and so on. The major ones.

But then we have these others today – the parables of the mustard seed, the yeast, the treasure in the field, the pearl of great value and the net. Parables that we might have heard, but parables that might get glossed over as we read through the gospels.

We might be like the disciples when they first heard Jesus tell these parables: Verse 51 "Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked. "Yes," they replied.

Which is a pretty standard teacher-student response, I think. A teacher explains something and asks the students if they've understood it. Each student says nervously 'yes' but is hoping that one of the other students has understood it and will explain it again later.

Or sometimes if people give me directions. "You take the main road down here, turn left at the post office, and go on until you see the park, then you straight through the roundabout and then the third left, and then the second right... have you got that?"

"Yes" I say... grateful that there's a map function on my phone.

And then Jesus responds to the disciples 'yes' by telling them another parable ""Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

Got that?

This small group of parables have always been there. We've probably heard them when they've come around in the three-year cycle of the lectionary readings, but they've probably never seemed important enough to dwell on for terribly long.

I read of a priest who commented that he'd never been to visit anyone on their death bed, and have them ask him to read to them one of these parables – 'Father, before I die, read to me again the parable of the mustard seed.' These are indeed the minor parables.

But, like the minor prophets, the minor parables are part of the scriptures, part of the inspired word of God, and we can learn from them, too.

The first one is about the mustard seed. Jesus says "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches." (vs. 31-32)

There's some hyperbole here. Mustard seeds aren't the smallest of all seeds – poppy seeds are smaller for instance, and so are many, many more – but Jesus isn't teaching the disciples about horticulture. I don't know which seeds the people of first century Judea would have been familiar with, but, it seems that the mustard seed would have been amongst the smallest that was commonly known.

Similarly, mustard trees aren't amongst the biggest trees. I've heard it described as tall shrub or even an oversized weed. And again, the relative size of the mustard tree with the other trees of Judea isn't the point – Jesus is teaching about the growth from this tiny seed, to a tree that birds can nest.

That's what Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like. The kingdom of God begins as a tiny thing, but it's planted in the ground, and it grows – it flourishes to a scale far beyond its beginning. It provides shelter – protection – to many.

And that's how we see the kingdom of heaven growing – from a seed planted in the middle east, to a living thing that spans the world and provides shelter for so many.

But then Jesus tells another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough." (13:33)

Just something an average woman of Judea would do. Take some flour, add some yeast, knead it and bake some bread.

Except that she took sixty pounds of flour. That's an awful lot of flour. I usually buy flour at woollies in 1kg packets... if I bought 27 of them, I'd be just short of sixty pounds. 300grams for a standard loaf of bread – so this woman will end up with about 90 loaves of bread. And all that kneading is going to give her some pretty strong arms!

But really Jesus isn't teaching us about baking. The kingdom of heaven, he says, is like the yeast that the woman adds to the flour. As she mixes and kneads the yeast spreads through the flour and causes it to change. Just like as the good news of Jesus God spreads across the world it causes change.

So in these first two minor parables, we learn of this change from small to large. The seed that grows into a tree, the yeast that causes the dough to rise.

That fits with what might expect – or hope – of the kingdom of God, in the world and in our lives.

But then we move forward in the chapter to verse 44 to next of the minor parables, where Jesus says “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.”

Now, parables are stories constructed to teach something – though they teach some truth, they’re not true in the sense of ‘these events actually happened’. There was no historical actual Good Samaritan (though many Samaritans may have done good things), there was no actual Prodigal Son, and so on.

Which I think is helpful to remember especially when we think about this man and the treasure in the field, because I start thinking about why there was treasure hidden in the field (had some pirates buried it there?), how did this man find it? (was there an X marking the spot? Was he systematically searching the field on the off chance there was some treasure to find?), why didn’t he just take it? (Or was it too large to carry?).

We wonder what is it that Jesus is teaching us here... I don’t think it’s about treasure hunting. I don’t think it’s about not stealing someone’s treasure either, because he does behave a bit unethically – after all he buys the field without apparently the owner knowing how much it’s really worth.

A couple of weeks ago, we heard the story of how Esau sold his birthright to Isaac for a bowl of lentil stew, and about how the value of things wasn’t always known or appreciated. I think this one verse parable ties into that – when we find something of great value, we should do all we can to ensure we get it. We give up things to follow Jesus.

Which leads us into the next parable, but this one spans two verses as Jesus says “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.” (13:45-46)

Again, it’s about something of great value, but this time it isn’t hidden away. This time it’s in plain sight – probably with a price tag attached.

Pearls were even more valuable in the ancient world than they are today, with about 99% of pearls sold today being cultured pearls – artificially seeded in oysters and other shellfish – making pearls much more common.

Natural pearls are still the most valuable even today, and the larger and more perfectly spherical they are, the more valuable again. For the trivia buffs: The most valuable pearl in the world is not spherical, and it doesn’t have the usual pearl lustre either – because it was formed within a giant clam. But it is more than 20cm in diameter, weighs over 6kg and is valued at US\$3.5million.

The merchant, though, finds the pearl, and – like the man who found the treasure in the field – sold all he had, so he could buy this single, fine pearl (and I like to think that Jesus had in mind a lustrous, perfectly spherical pearl when he told this parable).

The kingdom of heaven is wonderful, but it’s also costly! That’s what Jesus is teaching his disciples here. And we might wonder how that fits with understanding that God’s kingdom is given freely to all who turn to Jesus.

Well, ‘Grace might be free’ as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, ‘but that doesn’t mean it’s cheap!’ As we are changed by God, we give up the ways of the world, and that might mean giving up some of the comforts.

Jesus then offers yet another short parable: “Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away.” (13:47-48).

This time Jesus says the kingdom is like a net cast into the lake. It catches lots of fish. All sorts. But there are good fish and bad fish, and the fishermen sort through them. The fish that are rejected, for whatever reason, aren’t thrown back into the water – instead, they’re thrown away. It’s after the day’s fishing, the net’s been pulled in, the boat rowed to shore, pulled up on the bank. The good fish go into the baskets, and the bad onto the rubbish pile.

In case the disciples were a bit slow in picking up his meaning, Jesus explains it to them: “This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (13:48-50).

Yikes. Jesus has gone from talking about the growth of the kingdom, to the desirability and cost of the kingdom, and on to the end of days. In the end, the angels will come and they will sort the good from the bad, and the bad will be thrown in to the fire...

He doesn’t give us any details of the fate of the good – but the wicked? Well, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth...

“Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked.

“Yes,” they replied. (13:51).

And we need to ask ourselves if we have understood these things. It’s easy enough to remember the details – the mustard seed, the yeast, the treasure, the pearl and the net... but if we truly understand, we will take them to heart. We can’t be part of the kingdom of God without the kingdom of God changing us. We won’t be perfect, this side of the new heavens and the new earth, but we will be changed.

That bombshell delivered, and the disciples claiming to understand all that Jesus has been talking about, he goes on to share one more parable:

He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.” (13:52).

This time, Jesus is teaching not about the kingdom of God, but about those who become disciples of the kingdom of God. Disciples of Jesus. Christians. Us.

What he says in some way qualifies the parables of the treasure and the pearl. Those who turn to Jesus don’t give up what they knew beforehand. The teacher of the law who becomes a follower of Jesus still knows the law. And still studies the law, and still teaches others the law, but the teacher now does those things in the context of knowing Jesus.

As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17-18)

Every one of us comes to Jesus with knowledge and gifts and abilities that we had before we knew him. Jesus says that we shouldn't ignore that knowledge, or give up those gifts or not use those abilities now that we are following him. Jesus calls us to use our new treasures as well as old.

In this series of minor parables, we learn about how the kingdom grows, what it is worth, what God's plan is for sorting the good from the bad, and how we should work as members of the kingdom.

Good stuff.

But where does that leave us today. Jesus has given us these wonderful images of a growing kingdom, but often it's hard to see.

Here we are celebrating 60 years of worship and ministry in this place – but we can look around and see there aren't as many people worshipping and ministering here as there once were.

60 years on, all we have is something like a mustard seed when we hoped for a tree!

Where are the results of all that effort?

Well, perhaps we can think of it like the yeast that's hidden somewhere in the dough! The Kingdom of God is doing its work, but we can't put a timeline on how long it will take before we see the results.

One day ... we'll be able to possess that fine pearl, and rejoice in the treasure. One day you'll see how the yeast that has started here has transformed the flour and produced bread for many. One day ... that tiny seed will become a tree.

But as Jesus said "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (Matthew 24:46)

In the meantime, we pay the price, we give up what we have, we nurture the mustard seed, and we knead the dough - because we believe – we know – that one day the Kingdom of Heaven will be fulfilled – and we will be part of it.

Amen