

Wednesday July 27 2016 St Peter's

Three Parables

Matthew 13: 31-33 & 44

Planting Weeds, hiding Yeast, burying treasure – three of the many parables Jesus told.

Jesus told parables to help his audience understand God's kingdom. However, because they rely on hidden meanings and local contexts, they often don't translate well across languages or cultures, so it's easy for us to miss their strangeness.

Take the parable about the mustard seed.

In Biblical times, people weren't that keen on Mustard trees. However hard you tried, you couldn't stop its tiny little seeds from spreading! There were even laws against them being planted in gardens because they took over the whole area, seeding and sprouting and becoming a nuisance. No farmer would deliberately plant one.

So Jesus is comparing God's Kingdom to a common plant that spreads like a weed and can be found in every unpromising nook and cranny. However, he says, if it's left to flourish, rather than being rooted out, then it may grow into a large bush which can nurture bird life and provide food.

Then, there's the parable about the woman and the yeast.

It's easy to skip over this parable because we all know that yeast makes bread rise.

But it also loses important elements in translation.

Firstly, it wasn't actually yeast as we know it but 'leaven'

Other translations have: the kingdom of God is like *leaven which a woman took and concealed in fifty pounds of flour until it was all leavened.*

For Jesus's hearers, *leaven* would have been a red flag.

Leaven was a piece of leavened bread, stored in a damp place until it was mouldy.

It was used like yeast, but the bread it produced often had a sour taste.

Significantly, everywhere else this word is found in scripture, it's a symbol of unclean things.

Jews were prohibited from eating it during feast days, and it couldn't be used as a burnt offering.

Paul also uses leaven to describe the corrupting influence of some people on the church, saying:

'don't you know that a little leaven leavens the whole batch?' - it was probably a common saying.

We might say, *"One rotten apple spoils the whole barrel"*.

Another strange element which gets lost in translation, is that the woman didn't actually mix the leaven into the flour. The correct translation is "conceal" or hide.

Why would anyone hide yeast inside a sack of flour?

Modern Jews have a ritual. When they're preparing for Passover, they do a complete spring clean.

The purpose is to find any yeast, or anything that works as a raising agent. It has to be thrown out, to show that their home is purified, free from corruption.

Part of the fun is that the mother always hides some yeast deliberately,

so that the children have a chance to find it, and feel righteous and proud when they throw it out.

We don't know how old that ritual is. Could it be that mothers of Jesus's day also deliberately hid yeast before Passover for their children to find?

Then there's the amount of flour used. The measure Jesus used was a bushel. It translates today into around 25 Kilogrammes! I wonder how much flour you keep on hand?

Would any one have that much? We generally keep a maximum of around 10ks, including wholemeal and white flour, in our pantry.

As usual, Jesus is telling stories that don't fit common sense.

When he feeds 5000 people with five loaves and two fishes, there are *twelve baskets* of leftovers.

And when he attends a wedding and his mother says they're running out of wine, he doesn't run down to the market for a few more bottles.

He changes 150 gallons of water to wine - enough to keep the party going for a week.

It seems, Jesus can't stop talking about the abundant, generous blessings of God.

Even though everybody else thinks they're living in a world of scarcity, Jesus is living in a world of abundance, and he's always thinking big. So it's not surprising that Jesus thinks a mustard bush can turn into a tree. For him that's typical. It's not surprising that Jesus thinks a little bit of yeast can leaven twenty five kgs of flour.

Jesus is describing a God who is extravagant, over-the-top, abundantly generous. He wants us to be prepared for miraculous growth; weeds that turn into trees; yeast that leavens far more than the usual amount of flour.

One last parable:

"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.

Remember, parables are supposed to make us think. A man is walking along in someone else's field when he stumbles on a treasure.

He's very excited, and starts scheming to keep it all himself.

He hides it, presumably better than before.

He doesn't want anyone else, especially the owner of the field, to find it.

Then he sells everything he has and goes to the owner to bargain for the field.

We might imagine him saying: *"Well, the location isn't very good, and the land is TC3, but I might be prepared to take it off your hands!"*

So now he owns it and while we might think he'd sell the treasure and live happily ever after, he can't do that! Because under Jewish law, if the former owner ever finds out about the buried treasure, he can claim it. Legally the treasure belonged to the last two owners of the land, not to the new purchaser. So the man can only sit quietly and hope no one finds out about the treasure; essentially it's useless to him.

The Roman government saw Jesus as a weed that needed to be rooted out of their garden. The Jewish leaders saw him as contaminating yeast that needed to be cast out, to keep their religion pure. Within a few years, government and religious leaders would see the fledgling church in the same way – insignificant, but potentially dangerous. Yet that tiny church would change the world.

And what about today? the world around us still sees churches as insignificant: a weed in a field, a little lump of yeast in a truck load of flour.

But Jesus says there is good news: There are still stories of miraculous growth, waiting to be told. Small seeds still grow into big trees.

God is still hiding leaven in flour.

The Kingdom of heaven is a gift from God, intended for everyone.

We may seek it and receive it, but try as we might, we can't buy it, and we certainly can't possess it.

It's a treasure beyond all price! Amen.